

DU BOISGOBEY'S SENSATIONAL NOVELS.

XXV.

FERNANDE'S CHOICE.

BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.



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FERNANDE'S CHOICE.

THEY sit facing each other on either side of a mantelpiece which looks somewhat like a pagoda, so lavishly is it laden with Japanese works of art. The woman is fair—with hair of that tawny tinge which the Venetian masters of the sixteenth century preferred. She is tall, with a slim waist and full bosom, and her skin is very white and transparent. Her full sensual lips, of the hue of pomegranate blossom, seem intended for kisses. She has narrow arched feet and adorable hands, whilst as for her eyes, they at times sparkle strangely like gold, and then, of a sudden, all light fades away from them. You must not, however, now try to read her thoughts in those changeful orbs of hers, for her mind is wandering in distant imaginary regions. But not for long; for lo! the flame blazes up once more and a flash, like that of lightning, darts from both her eyes. A word has sufficed to rouse this dreaming beauty.

How old is she? An experienced Parisian would say at first sight that she was thirty and perhaps rather more; whilst a college freshman would swear that she was under twenty-five.

The man who is seated near her is five feet eight in height, with a dark complexion, sparkling eyes, an aquiline nose, and a jet black beard; his shoulders are broad enough to bear the second Henri's legendary coat of mail. He looks indeed like some warlike knight modified by civilization. Social intercourse has softened the expression of his salient features and imparted more grace to his movements. In one word, he seems to be a cavalier and a gentleman, blended so as to form a perfect whole. He talks quietly and without throwing his arms about, as is so customary among Frenchmen. He has also learnt how to control his tongue, once violent in its utterances, and he knows how to practise dissimulation if need be, so as to secure revenge. Still, in moments of sudden anger, he is a man to strike a swift and fatal blow.

It can be easily seen that he is at home. His head is bare, he wears a silk shirt, a pair of baggy trousers, and a little jacket. His companion, however, is visiting, for she is arrayed in a mantle trimmed with blue fox fur, and a round hat decorated with a pheasant.

ant's plumage. Still, she has taken her gloves off, and with her eyes raised to the ceiling and her feet resting on the heads of the fire-dogs, she leans back in a low arm-chair and smokes a mild, yet fragrant, Russian cigarette.

The little room, hung with Cordova leather and replete with works of art, is but dimly lighted by an old lamp of Chinese make. The spot seems a perfect lover's nest, suited for an exchange of ardent embraces and glowing protestations. But if these two are lovers, they, at least, show no signs of affection ; they watch each other askance, and it seems as though a storm were brewing in this cosy retreat.

"What are you thinking of, my dear Fernande ?" asks the man at last, after a long pause.

"I'm thinking of you, Jacques," replies the woman, without modifying her attitude.

"Really ?"

"Why, yes ; is there anything so astonishing in it ?"

"Well, you have been here for half-an-hour without saying three words to me, and without barely deigning to glance at me."

"The fact is I was in the clouds, but I ask nothing better than to alight on *terra firma* again. Shall we have a chat ?"

"Certainly, I am at your orders."

"Take care, for I intend to try you."

"Do so, pray."

"Very well, then. Do you remember, my friend, how long we have been engaged ?"

"Oh ! the time has passed by so swiftly. Our happiness has been unclouded and it will last forever, I am sure."

"Who knows, perfect happiness is not of this world ?"

"You say that very strangely ; have you anything to complain of ?" asked Jacques, smiling.

"Why should I complain ? you never complain of me. In fact, it seems as though you were becoming indifferent to me."

"Oh ! merely give me some cause for jealousy and I will prove to you that I am a perfect Othello."

"Indeed ! Well, you are dark enough to play the part. But jealousy is folly, especially at the present time—for I want to ask you a serious question."

"What, pray ?"

"Are you not of opinion that it is time for us to bring matters to an issue ?"

"In what way ?"

"Wait a minute. Let me speak. When you were introduced to me I had been a widow for fifteen months, and I was not sorry to enjoy a certain amount of freedom. I had been married by my parents to a man whom I scarcely knew. Monsieur Mireille was twenty years older than myself and was absorbed in business all his life. He had only married me for the sake of my dowry, and had no affection for me at all. His death delivered me from a life I

abhorred, and I felt no inclination to enter the bonds of matrimony again."

"The fact is that your husband did not make you happy."

"Well, I met Monsieur Jacques Valbourg and was unable to resist the dictates of my heart. I do not regret having met and known you, mind, for since then I have learnt what happiness is."

"By the way you talk, one would think that you had had enough of it," said Jacques, almost sarcastically.

"Not at all; but I am tired of mystery and hypocrisy. My happiness has not been unalloyed, for I have a deal to reproach myself with. I yielded to your entreaties, our connection was kept a secret, and I confided in your honour since you had promised to marry me."

"But there is surely time enough to think of that."

"We have been thinking of it for a long while," answered Fernande. "There are no more obstacles now, and it is time to arrive at a decision. I came here to-day to ask you to keep your promise with as short a delay as possible."

Valbourg, no doubt, was worried by this formal request, for he did not show any haste in replying.

"You hesitate!" exclaimed Madame Mireille. "Then I know what I wished to learn, and I also know what course I shall adopt."

"Pray listen to me, Fernande," her lover murmured; and so saying he took hold of her hands and he would, no doubt, have fallen on his knees, but she rose to her feet and *dryly* retorted:

"Speak! what pretext can you think of inventing to excuse your refusal?"

"None; but pray reflect, and I—"

"I have reflected, and I have come to a positive decision. Why shouldn't you marry me? You are thirty-seven and I am thirty. You have an income of sixty thousand francs a year; I have one of seventy thousand. Your father was a shipper, mine a banker. We belong to the same social set, and our marriage would in no way surprise either your friends or mine. You are perfectly free to do as you please; and on my side I am not dependent on any one—and you cannot say that we don't understand each other."

"I fear that you would soon regret plighting your troth irreversibly. I fear that you would soon hold me in horror—and I do not wish to become odious to you."

"Say rather that you wish to break off the connection. I am punished for my weakness, I ought never to have listened to you; but I thought you a man of honour. However, no matter, let us put an end to it all. I will take you at your word, and—"

Madame Mireille stopped short in the middle of her sentence, and began to listen attentively. Valbourg looked at her in surprise.

"What is that noise?" she resumed, in an undertone. "Is there any one in your rooms?"

"I haven't heard anything," was the reply.

" Well, I feel certain that some one has just entered the apartments."

" It is impossible. I was expecting you, and my valet is out and won't be back till late. I am quite sure that we are alone here, unless some thief has opened the front door with a skeleton key, which strikes me as the height of improbability. However," added Valbourg, " since you are so anxious, I will go and make sure that no one is here."

Fernande was still listening, but, no doubt, she heard nothing more, for she hastily rejoined : " No, stay—I must have been mistaken, and I do not care to tarry here, as I shall not come back again."

" Are you really serious ? " asked Jacques.

" Quite so. You refuse to become my husband, and unless we are married, I will have nothing more to do with you."

" Come, Fernande, don't lose your temper. There is plenty of time—"

" Time, indeed ! No, no ! Your answers show me that you do not consider me worthy of bearing your name, and as I consider that I am worth quite as much as you are, I look upon your refusal as an insult. And being the insulted person, I have the choice of weapons, and I choose—separation."

Her tone of voice had changed, and her lover made a fresh mistake.

" Ah, ah ! I understand," he gaily said. " It was a test, and I was foolish enough to fall into the trap you laid for me. If I had answered : ' Our names shall be posted up side by side at the municipal offices to-morrow,' you would have sprung to my neck and have said as I did : ' There is no such great hurry.' "

" Do you really fancy that ? "

" I am sure of it. Come, let us make peace," said Jacques, and he walked towards Fernande.

" Have you lost your senses, or do you take me for a worthless woman ? " asked Madame Mireille, stopping him with a disdainful gesture. " Ah ! I am punished for my weakness, but henceforth there will be nought in common between you and I. Now, pray, let me pass. I wish to leave at once."

Valbourg turned pale. Anger was rising within him. " I understand," said he, in a husky voice, " you prefer another man to me."

" If that were the case, I should long since have ceased to see you. I shall never love another man as well as I have loved you ; but, all the same, within six months from now I shall be married, I swear it."

" You will allow me to pity your husband."

" Oh ! you will no doubt tell him of all that has transpired between me and you. I expect everything from you now that I know what your promises are worth."

Valbourg bowed his head.

"And now I hold you quits," resumed Madame Mireille. "Good-bye."

"You are going?"

"At once."

"And I shall never see you again?"

"We may perhaps meet in society, but I trust you will have the tact not to refer to our connection."

"Oh! you may safely introduce me to the man of your choice—without the slightest danger."

"You sneer, I see! So I have only wounded your self esteem. Had you been touched in the heart, you would merely think of revenging yourself."

"That is precisely what I am thinking of."

"I don't believe it! Of the two of us, I am the one who has a right to vengeance, for you have cruelly wronged me. But vengeance, no matter how complete it might be, would never restore me what I lose."

"Then you really cared for me?"

"I proved that by reminding you of your promise to marry me."

"What, again!"

"Yes, again, and always," answered Fernande, coldly.

"Well, I see that we shall never understand one another."

"No, indeed; so let us put a stop to it. Pray accompany me to the door, or rather, go on before. Your valet might come back earlier than you suppose, and as he has never seen me, I don't care to meet him on the last occasion that I shall ever call here."

"I will see you to your cab, and even further if you like—"

"Thanks for the proposal, but I must decline it. If you saw me home we should necessarily revert to this subject which seems to me to be exhausted; so I prefer to go alone."

Valbourg bowed without replying, and took a candle from the mantelshelf. Madame Mireille lowered her veil and followed him out of the little room in which their love had so suddenly taken flight.

Jacques' suite of bachelor apartments comprised the entire third floor of a house on the Boulevard Malesherbes. To reach the staircase it was necessary to cross the drawing-room, dining-room and ante-chamber—quite a journey, and Valbourg's pace was by no means fast. He walked, indeed, slowly, as if he were reflecting and felt anxious to renew the conversation. Could he make up his mind to marry a woman, who, although virtuous before she knew him, had listened to his pleadings? There are certain "principles" in French society which the born Boulevardier invariably respects—principles which may even be current in some sections of English society, though they are wrong, and, in fact, worthy of the deepest censure. A man considers that he disgraces himself if he marries a woman he has trifled with; he does not reflect that her frailty is due to his own impassioned entreaties, that if she has sacrificed herself it has been for his sake, and that she is worthy of reward.

Loving-vows, the most solemn oaths and promises are forgotten on the day when the victim calls upon the man who has wronged her to do his duty ; any subterfuge is admissible, providing one can secure a delay ; and postponement follows upon postponement till at last the confiding woman realises that the man to whom she has given her heart, is but a deceiver and a traitor —a perfidious villain who, nevertheless, holds his head high in society and smiles complacently when he recalls his various conquests.

That Madame Mircille considered herself deeply wronged was evident. She preserved the same haughty mien and did not evince the slightest desire to arrive at a reconciliation. She crossed the suite of apartments in silence, and when they reached the ante-room together, it was she who opened the door.

Petty incidents almost always bring about the decisive events of life. Valbourg had hoped that Fernande would hesitate at the last moment. Thus her haste to have done with the matter, without any further explanation, wounded him to the quick. Perhaps even Madame Mireille trusted that Jacques would stay her hand as she touched the door handle ; it was a double mistake which was bound to cost them dear. They did not exchange a word before parting on the landing ; pride still kept their mouths tightly closed. However, when Madame Mircille had taken a few steps down the staircase, she raised her head to glance once more at the man she had loved so well, and Valbourg, with a sudden impulse, called her by her Christian name. She started, and but little was needed to induce her to come up stairs again ; however, it was no doubt written that their love was to be bruised that day.

"No," she murmured, "it's too late. I can no longer forgive you." And thereupon she hurried down the stairs.

For a moment Valbourg thought of running after her, but he conquered what he considered to be a weakness and abruptly re-entered his apartments.

"Gone ! she has gone !" he muttered. "Whom has she left me for ? I will discover it ! That condition of hers was merely a pretext. She surely never imagined that I did intend to marry her—when I can marry an heiress any day I choose—and I will marry one if only to vex her, whereas she won't find a husband anywhere ; for although I have kept silent as to our connection, there have been no end of suspicions. People will find out the truth some day or other, and then she will bitterly repent of having left me like that !"

This soliloquy lasted for half a minute and then suddenly Valbourg's ideas took another turn. "Oh ! I will punish her, she shall come on her knees to beg mercy of me," he thought. "It won't be enough for me to marry some one else ; I must devise another vengeance, something quite uncommon and refined. And now I think of it, I have her letters in my writing-case—so that if she worries me she had better remember that I am in a position to exercise reprisals."

Valbourg now stood in his drawing-room which adjoined a gallery

full of books and paintings—a gallery that he had to cross to reach his bed-room. As the door of this gallery was ajar Jacques pushed it open, but ere he took another step forward, he drew up on the threshold, fairly overcome with astonishment.

This gallery was narrow, but long and lofty, so that it was but dimly illuminated by the candle which Valbourg had taken off the mantelshelf in his smoking-room, in view of showing Madame Mireille to the door. However his eyes were sufficiently powerful to enable him to perceive a man, who turned his back upon him and who was engaged in performing some singular operation. Indeed this fellow, who was crouching down before what looked like a book-case, was busy doing something with his hands ; and, in fact, so absorbed was he in his work, that he did not even turn his head when Jacques reached the threshold. He had no doubt not heard the approach of the master of these apartments.

Valbourg on his side had sufficient presence of mind not to stir. He was by no means a coward, but before adopting any course, he wished to ascertain what was going on. Suddenly he recollect ed that the article of furniture before which this man was kneeling was not a book-case but a safe—an elegant safe—a kind of cabinet to outward view, of ebony incrusted with brasswork and mother of pearl, in the style of Boule's masterpieces, but nevertheless extremely solid, thanks to an inner sheathing of steel and iron. The person who was there attacking this safe, which ordinary people would have thought simply an artistic piece of furniture, could only be a thief, and what is more, an extremely well informed one.

Moreover the fellow did not seem to belong to the ordinary set of low bred burglars. The latter are not especially particular as to their attire, whereas the person whom Valbourg now saw, intent on purloining his money, was dressed like a notary going to read a marriage contract. Black trousers, a black dress-coat, nothing was wanting, not even a white tie. This singular thief had dressed for his predatory expedition just as a gentleman dresses when he goes into society. He had moreover taken the precaution to bring a lantern with him, and he was working away most composedly, without evincing the least sign of flurry. As soon as Valbourg had taken in the situation, he did not hesitate. He softly deposited his candlestick upon a chair, took three steps across the gallery, and sprung at the throat of the thief, who at once rose up and tried to free himself. But half suffocated by Valbourg's iron grip, he soon bent his legs and fell upon his knees.

"What! is it you, you scoundrel ?" exclaimed Valbourg, who by the light of the lantern, deposited on the floor hard by, had just recognised his own valet. "Come!" said he, shaking the fellow roughly. "Stand up!" and then catching him by the collar he set him on his legs again. "Ah! ah! Master Justin," he resumed, "you did not expect me so early, it seems ; and to all appearance I was only just in time. Had I been a quarter of an hour later, I should have found my safe empty !"

"Ah ! I've got no luck !" impudently replied the valet.

"No ; for I am going to take you to the station-house in person, and don't try to resist, for if you do I shall simply strangle you."

"It isn't worth while. I prefer imprisonment. You can let go of me, sir, I sha'n't move."

"Mind you don't, for I should kill you like a dog," said Valbourg, pushing the rascal against the wall.

"Oh ! I know how strong you are, sir, and if I had foreseen that you would be at home at this hour, I shouldn't have chanced the affair this evening."

The valet who spoke to his master in this cynical style, was a young fellow of between five and six and twenty years of age, slight of build and not unprepossessing in appearance. His clean shaven face, however, now had an expression of mingled cunning and insolence. He looked like one of the lackeys of Molière's comedies, dressed in nineteenth century garb.

"Yes, I have no doubt but what you wouldn't have chanced the affair to-night, as you put it, had you expected that you would find me here," said Valbourg who was stupefied by the thief's braggart coolness. "However, I should like to know," he added, "why you singled out this particular piece of furniture?"

"I knew you kept your valuables in it, sir ; I have had time to study your habits during the six months or so that I have been in your service."

"This is too much ! Then you confess that you entered my service with the intention of robbing me ?"

"I never confess anything—it's against my principles."

"Then when I take you before the commissary of police by-and-bye you mean to deny that I caught you in the act ?"

"Of course I do. After all, you have got no proofs against me. No doubt the police will believe you rather than me, as I'm only a servant. But all the same, if I see that matters look bad, I shall follow different tactics, and perhaps you will be sorry for having had me arrested, sir."

"What do you mean, you scamp ?" asked Valbourg in a rage.

"Oh ! nothing—only I might tell any number of things if I chose ; and among your acquaintances, sir, there are some people who wouldn't be particularly pleased if I let my tongue wag a bit."

Valbourg started ; and asked himself whether this was an allusion to Madame Mireille's visits. Although he had resolved to revenge himself upon her, he did not care to have their connection noised all over Paris. However, after a little reflection he said to himself that Justin could not possibly know anything about his assignations with Fernande ; for whenever he was expecting a visit from her, he had always sent his valet out of the way ; and she on her side had taken enough precautions to disconcert the most cunning spies.

"I don't fear you, my fine fellow," now said Jacques, in a firm voice, "and you will regret having threatened me. I might have

contented myself with turning you out of the house, but as you see fit to adopt that style of language, I shall just hand you over to a couple of police agents, and request the commissary to report upon the condition in which you have left my safe. The tools you were using to force it open are there, I suppose, and there must be some traces of your attempt."

"Oh ! sir, don't take me for a fool, pray. Jemmies and all that kind of thing are very good for professional burglars ; but I contented myself with using a key. You can see so for yourself, sir, as I have left it in the lock."

Jacques gave the safe a glance and saw that the scamp's statement was correct. "A false key !" he exclaimed. "So much the better ! We shall be able to find out where you had it made."

"That'll be found out if I choose, but not otherwise," replied Justin ; "for you can't imagine, sir, that I had that key made by an ordinary locksmith. But you haven't noticed, sir, that I know the combination letters, as well—they are all in their places, as you can see if you like, sir."

Valbourg hurriedly stooped down and experienced intense astonishment. How could Justin have guessed the chosen word ? And how far had he proceeded with this skilfully organised operation ? Possibly the theft was already perpetrated, and a considerable sum which Jacques had received from a broker on the previous day was perhaps already in his valet's pocket. He determined to find this out and accordingly he exclaimed : "I understand it. When I came in you had just finished despoiling me, and you were closing the safe up again."

"That's right, sir. I was just about to take myself off when you caught me. Ah ! I'm always an unlucky fellow."

"So you have pocketed my stocks and shares and bank notes ?"

"Only the bank notes, sir. It's dangerous to meddle with stocks and shares—not to mention that among the lot, there are a hundred shares or so of the "Union Générale" which have not been worth a copper since the great financial crash. However, I'm quite ready to return you, sir, the thirty-seven thousand francs in notes."

"No—no—you will be searched at the commissary's office and the plunder will be found upon you. That will be an additional proof. However, as you might take it into your head to rid yourself of your spoils, on the way, I intend to handcuff you at once."

Valbourg had just seen a strap, which had served to secure some books, lying upon a Boule table hard by, and, taking it up, he now advanced towards his valet, who still stood stock-still against the wall. "Come," said Jacques, "hold out your hands, you rascal."

"So you have quite made up your mind, sir, to send me to sleep at the prefecture dépôt ?" asked Justin without evincing any emotion.

"Do you for one moment imagine that I intend to keep you in my service ?"

"That would be the best thing to do, sir. In the first place I

have no inclination to begin again--and besides I might be able to give you some very useful information, sir."

"Information!" repeated Valbourg who again felt nervous. "Information about what or whom?"

"About a friend of yours, sir,—a friend you ought to be careful with. Oh! I sha'n't spare him if I come before the courts, for he's the cause of my going wrong."

"Have you the audacity to pretend that some one of my acquaintance advised you to rob me?" asked Valbourg in amazement.

"Better than that, sir. Some one prepared the whole affair, some one I was working for. I only had a small share in it, and yet I ran all the risk. I have been caught because your friend's information was faulty, so that I feel a grudge against him, and I shall denounce him, sure enough, if you carry things to the bitter end, sir."

"What do I care if you *do* denounce some villain of your own type?" exclaimed Valbourg indignantly.

"A villain whom you know very intimately, sir, and his trial will cause such a stir, that you will feel sorry that you didn't prevent it."

"Pooh, pooh! Don't imagine that I am going to let myself be influenced by such a parcel of lies."

"I'm not lying, sir, and if you'll promise to let me off, I'll tell you the name of your friend, sir."

This was said with so much assurance that Valbourg began to reflect. Despite the apparent improbability of the charge, it seemed desirable that he should investigate it properly. "I won't promise anything," he replied. "Just explain yourself and then I shall decide upon what course to follow."

A short pause ensued and then: "After all," grumbled Justin, "I may just as well tell you the gentleman's name, sir, for I feel sure that when you know what's up, you'll pay any price to avoid a scandal which would reflect a bit upon yourself."

"In the name of patience will you speak out or not?" cried Valbourg angrily.

"I'm willing—I'm willing, sir, to come to the point. You surely haven't forgotten, sir, that if I have had the honour of waiting on you for the last six months, it was because I was warmly recommended to you by one of your best friends, Count Stanislas de Bolgos."

"I recollect very well that Monsieur de Bolgos answered for you," said Valbourg. "You had no doubt deceived him by exhibiting some false certificates, and this very night at the club I shall tell him that we have both had to deal with a cunning rascal."

"The count will laugh in his sleeve if you tell him that, sir," Justin promptly replied. "But I don't want him to poke fun at you, sir, and so I'll just tell you what he's worth."

"What! do you dare to pretend that he is your accomplice?"

"No, I'm the accomplice—he's the principal.' The papers won't say much about me if we are tried at the assizes. The first rank in the trial will belong to your friend, sir, the Count de Bolgos, a member of the first club in Paris, a subscriber to the opera, and yet, all the same, a professional thief!"

"A thief! Monsieur de Bolgos a thief! Pooh! You tell me such an absurd lie as that—why, I've known him for the last three years."

"Oh! the count never works in person. He contents himself with pointing out the likely hauls to a lot of poor devils like me—poor fellows he employs and pays devilish bad—which is a great mistake on his part, for a time comes when his subalterans grow tired of being traded upon; and that's just my case."

"Bolgos, a robber chief—and in the midst of Paris—just like Fra Diavolo in Calabria, long ago," cried M. Valbourg. "Come, Justin, my fine fellow, I see that you have a lively imagination; but, unfortunately, your inventive faculties lead you astray. Who do you imagine will ever believe that the Count de Bolgos superintends amid his marble halls the expeditions of a set of bandits like yourself?"

"Amid his marble halls—that's happily put, sir, for you were to have been there this evening while I was at work here."

"How do you know that the count expected to see me this evening?" asked Valbourg, whose curiosity was now keenly aroused.

"Oh! it's simple enough, sir. I went to see him in the Rue Jean-Goujon yesterday—I go there every Monday—and he told me he should see you, sir, at the club in the evening, and that if you accepted the appointment he proposed making for to-night, he would inform me of it, by indicating the best time for operating. And, indeed, so it happened, sir, for I received a note from him this morning through the post."

"What! he writes to you!" cried Valbourg, still incredulously.

"Quite so, sir. I've got the letter about me, and if you would like to see it, sir—"

"Yes, I should, if only to prove that you are an impostor, for I don't admit that you hold any letter written by Monsieur de Bolgos—You must have fabricated one somehow or other—"

"Oh! the count didn't sign his name, but you know his handwriting well enough, sir," replied Justin, drawing from his pocket a folded slip of paper which he respectfully handed to his master.

Valbourg took hold of the note, and his amazement was great, indeed, when he read these few but highly significant words: "He will arrive at my place at ten o'clock, and will remain with me till midnight. The job must therefore be completed by eleven o'clock, and shortly after midnight you must come here to settle accounts. Don't forget to bring me back the key."

"The key?" muttered Valbourg in his bewilderment.

"Why, yes, sir—the key that opens your safe, sir—" was Justin's quiet reply. "The count handed it to me yesterday. It was made by a man in his employ. Oh! he has a perfect staff under his

orders—fellows who know how to make anything. You can't realise it, sir, I see. You don't understand how the count can have procured a pattern of the key. But you forget, sir, that he has often been with you in this gallery, and has often seen you open your safe, sir."

"That's possible, but—"

"Oh, nothing more was wanted," interrupted Justin. "The count always has some wax about him to take an impression with, and he is very skilful with his hands. He has sharp eyes, too, and he must have caught a glimpse of the combination word you used for opening the safe, sir. The proof of this is—he told me what it was. But the key isn't a great success I must say. I had no end of trouble in getting it into the lock, and I couldn't get it out again; and that was why you surprised me, sir, before I had finished."

Valbourg now had no doubt but what the note he had just read had been really written by M. de Bolgos; indeed this nobleman, Jacques' intimate friend, had a very peculiar style of handwriting, recognisable amid a thousand, and in this case he had not taken the slightest trouble to disguise it. Accordingly Justin spoke the truth; besides, he could never have guessed that his master was *expected that evening at the mansion where the count resided, in the Rue Jean-Gougon.*

On the previous day Valbourg had promised to go there to chat about an important business affair with M. de Bolgos; and he would certainly have kept this appointment with his friend, had not Madame Mireille called upon him much later than he had expected. However, his valet had no direct knowledge of the change in his intentions, having been sent out long before Fernande's arrival, and before Valbourg had made up his mind to stay at home. Instructed by M. de Bolgos, Justin must naturally have thought that his master had gone to spend the evening in the Rue Jean-Gougon, and thus everything seemed to indicate that the scamp had merely executed the orders of this foreign nobleman, who was neither more nor less than the leader of a gang of thieves.

This unexpected discovery placed Valbourg in a most embarrassing position. He was really very intimate with this man, Bolgos, so intimate, indeed, that he had presented him at Madame Mireille's house. He had even fancied that she found him to her liking, and that Bolgos on his side was favourably impressed by her charms. Still, however that may have been, M. de Bolgos had certainly abstained from courting the pretty widow, perhaps because he realised that such a course would annoy his friend; and in the result, Valbourg, grateful to the count for his self-sacrificing tact, had become still more and more intimate with him. They now met almost every day, as "all Paris" was aware—the "all Paris" of the first performances, the clubs and the race courses, and so the scandal which this nobleman's arrest must necessarily give rise to would unfailingly reflect upon his boon companion, Valbourg. Justin was right: it was better to avoid any stir.

On the other hand, however, it was almost equally perilous to remain upon the same terms with this man—a thief. Handsome Stanislas, by continuing to ply his agreeable calling, would run the risk of being detected by some one else. So the connection must be broken off, and this was no easy matter unless he, Valbourg, plainly told M. de Bolgos his reasons for putting a stop to their mutual intercourse. He thought of doing so, but before coming to a positive decision on the point, he resolved to obtain a little more information from his valet.

"As for what you have just told me, would you repeat it in the count's presence?" he inquired after a long interval devoted to reflection.

"If you absolutely required me to do so, sir, I wouldn't back out," replied Justin. "But I might have to pay a heavy penalty for doing so, as the count is the very man to suppress a talkative subordinate, if only to prevent him from wagging his tongue again. Rather than brave him face to face, I should prefer to denounce him to the authorities, and share the punishment with him. Like that I should at least save my skin. If you absolutely wish to bring me face to face with him, sir, I advise you to take a commissary and some police-agents with you, for the count is frightfully quick with his revolver, and having nothing more to fear, he wouldn't spare any one."

"I don't ask for your advice," replied Valbourg drily, "I merely want you to give me frank answers to the questions I am about to put to you. This is the only chance you have of securing any indulgence at my hands. Where did you first become acquainted with Monsieur de Bolgos?"

"At Monaco, sir, on a 'transversal.'"

"What do you mean by 'on a transversal'?"

"Oh! you know what a 'transversal' is at 'roulette' sir—three or six numbers following each other. The count always plays the double transversal game—numbers 28 to 33. And I do the same, so that made us intimate."

"Intimate! Are you deriding me?"

"You perhaps think that I have always been a servant, sir. If so, you are mistaken. I had some money once upon a time and I completed my studies. I can show you my bachelor's degree if you like, sir. But unfortunately I lost all the coin I had and something else besides in gambling. I was down to expedients when I first met Monsieur de Bolgos, and in point of fact I was in a nasty mess."

"Forgery or embezzlement, eh?" said Valbourg with a keen glance at Justin.

"I see that one can't hide anything from you, sir," was the valet's reply. "I was about to be arrested at the request of a wretched lodging-house keeper at Monte Carlo, when the count got me out of my trouble by paying for me. Only he was careful to keep the draft on which I had imitated his signature, and since then he has held me tight."

"I understand ; and he compelled you to become a valet ?"

"He began by bringing me back to Paris, and it was of my own free will that I entered his service to begin with. I stayed with him for two years and learnt a lot of things, and finally I won his confidence."

"To such a degree that he got you a situation here, so that you might rob me !" said Valbourg indignantly.

"I couldn't help obeying him, sir," pleaded Justin ; "but I swear by all the powers that be, that if I only knew a means of getting out of his clutches, I should ask no better than to discharge my duties as a servant, honestly. I've rather taken to the calling, and there can hardly be a better one when a fellow comes across a good master like you, sir.

"You surely haven't the audacity to suppose that I shall keep you after what you have just done ?" said Valbourg, waxing more and more wrathful.

"Well, I know that the least that can befall me will be dismissal—and I shall never forget that you had it in your power to ruin me altogether, sir. But let me begin by handing you back what I took out of the safe. Please, count the notes, sir ; they are all there," said Julian, offering his master a packet of bank-notes which had been concealed in his coat pocket.

Valbourg took the flimsies and counted them. The amount proved correct. Then as he no longer thought of having the theft recorded by a commissary of police, he placed the packet in his pocket-book and abruptly inquired, "How much was the count to give you of this money ?"

"He promised me ten per cent., sir ; but he believed that I should find a great deal more," replied Justin. "He told me you often had hundreds of thousand francs in your safe, sir, when you had made a lucky stroke on 'change."

"Well, how will you explain your failure here to-night to him ?"

"I shall tell him that you didn't go out this evening, sir, and he'll believe me sure enough, since he was expecting you, and you didn't go to see him. But I ought to tell you, sir, that if you dismiss me at once, the count will guess what has happened here, and take steps in consequence."

"Whereas if I consented to retain you—"

"Oh ! then he wouldn't think that anything was amiss, and you would have a hold on him, sir, as you could always denounce him whenever you chose. That letter gives you one bit of proof against him, sir, and I'll supply you with others. And if you'll allow me to say so, sir, it isn't to your interest to create a stir just now ; whereas, perhaps, you will be glad to know the count's secrets by-and-bye—if only to prevent him from marrying some lady—whom you might know, sir, and want to preserve from such a misfortune."

Without being aware of it, Justin had just touched the right chord. "What do you mean ?" asked Valbourg promptly, "and what lady do you presume to allude to ?"

"Oh! to none in particular, sir," replied the valet. "Only I know very well that the Count de Bolgos wants to marry a wealthy woman, and as he goes among much the same people as you do, sir, he might perhaps court a person in whom you took an interest."

"How do you know that he is anxious to marry?" resumed Valbourg.

"He has often told me that he had come to Paris mainly with that object. He even promised that if he succeeded, and that if I served him well, he would procure me a good situation abroad. And I think he would be glad to do that as my presence here after his marriage would annoy him."

"Then he would renounce his present calling if he married?"

"I think so. He must have made money enough by now not to care to run any further risks; and if he married into a respectable family, he would no doubt turn to the straight path again. You are probably aware, sir, that he is a real count, and that his honourability has never been questioned either in Galicia where he was born, or in Vienna where he lived for a very long time. Over there it was always said that he had ruined himself by gambling when he was very young, but that he had made his fortune again by turning his attention to business. I believe he made it by all sorts of underhand schemes, however, and to tell the truth, I think him capable of anything. Still, if any inquiries were made about him in Austria, the information would be very favourable; I'm sure of it; and as he can prove that he now possesses considerable means, he might fairly ask for the hand of a rich woman."

Valbourg let Justin rattle on without interrupting him. The scamp's audacious remarks had, in fact, fired quite a novel train of ideas in his master's mind; and, finding Valbourg so tolerant, he now resumed in an humble insinuating tone of voice: "If you liked, sir, everything could be easily arranged. I need only give the count his key again, telling him it didn't fit; and you need only change your combination letters, sir. Like that I couldn't begin again even if I had a mind to. And you could always send me away whenever you chose, sir, and continue seeing the count or not as you pleased. Only I wouldn't drop him all at once; it would be better to do it gently, sir. He will always be at your mercy as you have the letter he wrote to me—it greatly compromises him."

"It doesn't suffice," interrupted Valbourg. "It doesn't clearly prove that Monsieur de Bolgos wished to rob me and that he had entrusted you with the task of removing the contents of my safe. I need something else so as to be properly armed against him and you."

"I am ready to do whatever you may order, sir."

"Then sit down and write what I am about to dictate."

Justin at once complied. He fetched the candle which Valbourg had deposited on a chair, upon entering the gallery, sat down at a table and waited pen in hand.

"I acknowledge," dictated his master, "that with the help of a

false key I opened the safe of my employer, Monsieur Valbourg, being in his service as valet ; that I abstracted from the said safe the sum of thirty-seven thousand francs, and that it was only out of pity that my master did not have me arrested, for he had caught me in the act."

Justin wrote a clear legible hand, and Valbourg, who was standing near him, could read each word as it was inscribed upon the paper.

"I declare," he continued after a short pause, "that the false key, here mentioned, was handed to me by Count Stanislas de Bolgos, and that I acted on the latter's behalf and by his orders ; he having secured me my situation at Monsieur Valbourg's, six months ago, solely so as to be able to effect this theft, which he planned, profiting by his acquaintanceship with my master. I furthermore declare, and I can prove, that Monsieur de Bolgos is the leader of a band of thieves in which he enrolled me, despite myself, by abusing of the hold he had upon me, I having committed forgery to his prejudice."

"Do you particularly want those last words to be inserted, sir ?" asked the valet, raising his pen in the air.

"Yes, I do ; and you ought to understand that I thus furnish you with an excuse for your conduct here," replied Valbourg ; "if I decide to produce your confession later on, it will be to your benefit that people should know why you became the hireling of a society thief. The judges would grant you the benefit of extenuating circumstances."

"I hardly think so, sir, but I leave my fate in your hands."

"Your fate depends upon yourself. Have you any other misdeeds upon your conscience ?"

"No, sir ; I forged the count's signature on a draft for two thousand francs, and I tried to rob you, sir, nothing else. It's true that if I had succeeded here, the count would probably have given me other jobs of the same kind. However, since I have been under his thumb, he has never employed me elsewhere than here. He had his eye on you, sir, especially on you, for he hoped to make a big haul. He knew you had three hundred thousand francs at your broker's."

"Yes," said Valbourg, "I remember having told him that—and I added that I meant to take the money out of my broker's keeping."

"He thought you had done so already, sir ; and if I had taken it to him to-night you would never have seen it again, as you surely wouldn't have suspected the Count de Bolgos ; while, as for myself, neither the notes nor the false key would have been found in my room. It had been arranged that the count should keep my share for me until I no longer had anything to fear—so even supposing that I had been arrested, I should have got off with a few days' detention. You would no doubt have dismissed me, sir, but the count would have found me another situation and would have

forced me to rob my new master after a little time. I prefer being in your hands, sir. I have been a rascal, no doubt ; but as matters stand there will be a change for the better."

Justin's language and manners had already greatly altered ; for if he still affected an easy air, it was not in view of braving his master, as he had made a show of doing at the outset. In fact he now seemed anxious to quiet him by dint of frankness and humility. Was this a sign of sincere repentance, betokening conversion ? Valbourg was the more inclined to think so as the idea agreed with a plan which he was now revolving in his mind. "And so," said he, looking Justin full in the face, "you are disposed to lead a less dangerous and more honest life ?"

The valet turned pale but remained silent ; emotion was stifling him.

"Come, speak out," resumed Valbourg ; "are you rotten to the core, or is there still anything to be hoped for with you ?"

"Ah, sir ! " cried Justin, "if you would only help me out of the mire I have fallen into, I would go through fire and water for you. You don't know, sir, you can't know," he added in a husky voice. "I've become a forger and a thief, it's true ; and only a little while ago I tried to put on a cheeky air in answering you. You must have taken me for a hardened rascal ; I suppose you did, and yet all the time I was longing to fall at your feet and beg your pardon. But I thought myself lost, and so I tried to screw up my courage by playing the braggart. And, yet, now you speak kindly to me, sir. Oh ! I've no longer any wish to brag or lie. If you ordered me to give myself up, I'd go straight to the station-house and confess everything."

"Begin by signing the confession you have just written," rejoined Valbourg ; "yes, don't forget to sign it. Very good—is that your real name, Justin Durand ?"

"Yes, sir. I have my certificate of birth upstairs, in my bedroom. If you like to look at it, sir, you will see that I was born at Algiers and that my father was a retired army captain. As long as he lived I walked straight—but he died two years ago and left me some fifty thousand francs which I spent in six months' time. Unluckily for me I was fond of gambling."

"And you are so now, I suppose ?"

"That's true. Nearly all my wages go in gambling dens. But if you save me from the galleys, sir, I think I shall have the courage to reform."

M. Valbourg now took up Justin's confession and placed it beside the bank-notes in his pocket-book. Then, having with some little difficulty removed the false key from the lock of the safe, he handed it to Justin, saying : "Go and take this key back to Monsieur de Bolgos, and tell him that you can't use it, as I have changed the combination word."

"What ! you forgive me, sir ?"

"No, but I am willing to try you. If you don't return here, I

shall know what to think of you, and I sha'n't run after you to prevent you from getting hanged elsewhere. If you do come back again, I shall give you my instructions, and we will then see how you carry them out. However, you are at liberty, if you like, to betray me this very evening by informing Monsieur de Bolgos of what has taken place here. If you warn him he will no doubt decide to cross the frontier, and in that case I shall be well rid of him."

"Oh ! he won't leave Paris, for I sha'n't tell him anything," replied Justin eagerly.

"All right. Then I shall decide upon my course at a later date. I have his letter and your confession, so that I don't fear either of you."

Justin was about to protest that his intentions were most praiseworthy, but Valbourg silenced him by a gesture and took hold of his arm. "No words," said he, leading him to the door of the flat. "Acts are what I want. Come to my room to-morrow morning and report to me the interview which you will have with Monsieur de Bolgos to-night. I shall easily discern whether you speak the truth or not."

The valet went off, and his master then returned to the cosy apartment where, a few hours earlier, Madame Mireille had summoned him to choose between matrimony and separation. "If that rascal has told me the truth," muttered Valbourg, raising his head, "I think I hold the refined vengeance I was anxious for. Fernande told me that she wanted a husband. Well, she shall have one !"

Strange it was that this man should to all intents show compassion for a thief, and yet plan an atrocious revenge upon a woman, whose only fault, as regards himself, was that she had loved him too well. But then human nature is full of contradictions.

II.

The beautiful Fernande Mireille with the tawny hair was the only daughter of a general who had never won any glory on the battle-field. Envious folks had even pretended that his epaulets had never received the baptism of fire. This, however, was going too far, for he had served in the African and Italian campaigns. Still, he had certainly danced more quadrilles at the Tuileries balls, than he had commanded charges upon the foes of France. He had enjoyed high favour under the Empire, and his wife's beauty had in no wise impeded his advancement; in fact, rather the contrary. However, as misfortune would have it, General Garnois had died soon after the collapse of the Imperial government, and his widow having followed him to the grave a few months later, Fernande had remained in the charge of one of her mother's cousins, a certain baroness de Soumans, who was about as strange a baroness as could anywhere be found.

She was the widow of a petty nobleman and lived on a meagre allowance combined with the proceeds of various singular callings. For instance, she was a match-maker, and earned some little money by finding husbands and wives for marriageable young women and eligible old men. She thus had no difficulty in settling her young relative Fernande, who was charming, and who possessed a dowry of three hundred thousand francs. M. Mireille, a banker and money jobber, was accepted by Fernande without any show of repugnance, and the baroness received a handsome commission from the happy bridegroom. Mireille already had the reputation of being wealthy, but in reality, he was only on the road to fortune, so that he was delighted at being able to pocket Mademoiselle Garnois' hundred thousand crowns. He employed them profitably, and he showed due gratitude towards his wife, for when he died after six years' married life, he left her the snug little fortune of a million and a half of francs.

Fernande, who was young and ardent, did not and could not love a man so much older than herself; but impulsiveness was blended with reason in her nature, and soon after plighting her troth, she learnt how to turn her position to account. She decided upon a line of conduct from which she never once swerved. Launched into the financial spheres of Paris—spheres in which business never

interferes with pleasure—she willingly allowed her admirers to flirt with her, but she laughed at all their burning declarations ; and so comported herself that her conduct never once gave rise to gossip. However, whilst remaining a virtuous woman, she acquired great knowledge of life, and studied those members of the sterner sex who showed themselves desirous of pleasing her, and who seemed to her worthy of attention. She let them come forward as candidates as it were, but she declared that she meant to reserve her vote until a day which did not prove very far distant ; for M. Mircille had the tact to shuffle off this mortal coil, leaving behind him a will which appointed *his wife sole legatee*. *This was not paying too dearly for six years of unclouded domestic life, and Fernande had well earned both her fortune and her freedom.*

However, she did not evince any haste to abuse of either. Her term of mourning was at first merely enlivened by a little innocent flirtation ; she provided herself with a companion who, for various very good reasons, was not the Baroness de Soumans ; she slightly cut down her expenditure ; and she lived in comparative retirement so as to consolidate, as it were, the high reputation she had already won.

As it may readily be believed, this charming and wealthy young widow had no lack of suitors. She had dark admirers and fair admirers ; handsome ones and plain ones ; some of them were over enterprising, whilst others were unduly timid ; several, too, were practical minded men, and a few were of a poetical turn. There was the stoutish young masher with a clean shaven upper lip and side whiskers, who dressed in the English style and affected what is called “Britannic phlegm ;” and there was also the slim Parisian with a beak like nose, who rolled up his eyes and made such extravagant gestures that he might have passed for an incarnation of what the Italians have dubbed “la furia francese.” However, Madame Mireille did not encourage the hopes of any of her suitors, nor, on the other hand, did she do aught to discourage them ; she contrived to keep them at her feet without taking any engagement whatever ; and it indeed seemed as though with true feminine coquetry she derived a positive pleasure from prolonging their suspense as to her decision.

It is difficult to tell what might have happened if Jacques Valbourg had not suddenly entered the lists. He was young, handsome, and strong. He possessed all the physical qualities which the defunct Mireille had been deficient in : and he notably had that bold, manly air which fascinates the fair sex. Fernande was acquainted with his position, his tastes, and his habits, for he moved in the same society as herself. On reaching his majority, he had come into possession of a considerable fortune, honourably acquired by his father, and since then he had always lived as an intelligent philosopher. Energy and sensuality were mingled in his concentrated nature, and yet he lived quietly, only conforming to the customs of society when it pleased him to do so. Unlike most

young Parisians of fashion, he did not exert himself to acquire a "fast" reputation, and although he was to be met at the various resorts where wealthy people most do congregate, the "high life" newspapers never included him among the "mashers" who make it their business to entertain the public.

Fernande fell desperately in love with Jacques and her passion was reciprocated, only it did not follow the course which she had looked forward to. Jacques' brief courtship ended in an intrigue on which it is needless for us to dwell. Still, however deserving of censure Madame Mircille may have been, she had the excuse of being taken by surprise; and, then, her passion gaining the upper hand, she darted for a time along the wrong path regardless of the consequences. This beautiful woman, seemingly born for love, had lived for six years with an old husband, who had evinced no appreciation of her charms, and although her conduct was undoubtedly blamable, it may be that the reader will admit that there were some extenuating circumstances in her case. It must be added moreover, that this intrigue between Valbourg and the young widow was kept a profound secret. Madame Mireille visited and held receptions as before, whilst Jacques still played his game of cards at the club, drove every afternoon to the Bois, and spent the evening at a theatre. However, not a day elapsed without their seeing one another. There had been a great change in Valbourg's establishment certainly: but this was the only apparent alteration in his mode of life. He had dismissed all his servants save his valet, whose service was regulated with mathematical precision. Justin slept on the sixth floor of the house and never entered his master's presence without being rung for. Thus Madame Mircille was able to call upon Valbourg without her visits being known.

And yet she had a confidante. Since she had glided along the wrong path, she had renewed her acquaintance with the Baroness de Soumans, who, alone, was acquainted with this intrigue. The baroness was certainly not the person to give her young relative any good advice, and Fernande had in no degree warned her as to her intention of summoning Jacques to marry her. She had kept her remorse to herself, and, indeed, she had hesitated for some time before delivering this ultimatum; for she realised that Jacques' refusal to keep his promise would entail immediate separation. She was not the woman to put up with disdain, nor, on the other hand, was she of a nature to retreat in presence of danger, whatever it might be; and thus it happened that one evening she decided to stake her fate upon a single card. It is true, however, that she had expected to win the game.

But she had lost it. She had had to contend against ungovernable pride, and Valbourg had cruelly implied, by his language and behaviour, that a man with any self-respect could never marry the woman he had led astray. Fernande considered Jacques' conduct to be outrageous, and on the morrow of the scene at the Boulevard Malesherbes—infuriated like a wounded lioness—she

asked herself how she might secure her revenge. She meditated as to how she might strike Jacques in a vulnerable part, and she longed to begin operations.

Another woman might perhaps have hesitated, have said to herself that she had loved this man who had now betrayed her, and have decided to spare him, if only out of memory for their past attachment. Such was not the case with Fernande, however. She asked herself how she should punish Valbourg, how she might deal him a fatal blow. She reflected that he was not to be attacked either as regards money matters or as regards his honour—as honour goes among men; and, after some little thought, as her wish to marry again was a perfectly serious one, she decided that she must turn to matrimony for her vengeance.

It occurred to her that she might select a husband among Jacques' friends—choosing the foremost of them—the one whose position was most lofty, who took the lead in society. This man she might circumvent, and bring to her knees. With her powers of fascination she would force him to sue for her hand, and finally she would consent to marry him, in view of demonstrating what she was worth. Valbourg would, no doubt, be overcome with mortification thereat, and bitterly repent of having declined the honour which she had been ready to do him.

Such, then, was the scheme which occurred to Fernande, and on the following afternoon she sat in her boudoir turning it over and over in her mind, thinking how she might parry or remove the various difficulties of execution, which were offered *prima facie*; and, withal, reflecting that the plan did not completely correspond with her vindictive feelings. Perhaps, indeed, she might devise some better revenge, and, if so, there would always be time for her to avail herself of another scheme, as, everything duly considered, immediate action seemed out of the question. To attain her object, she must begin by effecting a fresh change in her mode of life. She must extend her circle of acquaintance, and settle anew the employment of her time; in one word, she must revert to the life she had led before knowing Jacques.

Naturally enough, she thought of warning and consulting the only person who knew about her intrigue—the Baroness de Soumans, whom she seldom saw, but to whom she had been paying an allowance for some years already. It was, indeed, requisite that the baroness should be informed of the quarrel, for there had been a question of a spring trip through Italy, and Madame de Soumans had been holding herself in readiness to accompany her young relative to Venice, where M. Valbourg was to have met them, as if by chance. The baroness had even wrung from Madame Mireille a promise to return to France by way of Monaco, where she was anxious to try a new combination which she had invented in view of winning vast sums at roulette.

The baroness was a gambler, and the allowance she received from Fernande barely sufficed her to satisfy her predominant vice;

still, she knew how to put on appearances when necessary, and she figured satisfactorily in society whenever, by any chance, she was invited out. She had been very beautiful in her earlier years, and she was still extremely dignified. Without any prejudices, professing, indeed, the most startling opinions upon morality, she seemed created expressly to serve as Fernande's chaperon, that is, since Fernande had strayed from the path of rectitude. The baroness, moreover, had a vast amount of experience; she knew how to dress and conduct herself in public; and she was by no means deficient in intellectual gifts. She possessed the sceptical derisive wit of the gay dames of the eighteenth century, and she was extremely well read. In addition to all this, she knew how to abstain from gossiping whenever occasion required—and this was certainly a very precious gift. She was really attached to Fernande in her way, and she would have done anything to serve her, though, on the other hand, whilst well acquainted with the position of affairs, she entertained a positive dislike for Valbourg.

Madame Mireille did not hold this independent-minded old lady in higher esteem than she deserved. She had, in fact, long mistrusted her, but they had been drawn together again in connection with Jacques; and, eventually, Madame Mireille had found out that the baroness knew how to give fitting advice in certain delicate matters. As Madame de Soumans was in straitened circumstances, her young relative even consented to provide for her; and to prevent the people she ordinarily saw from gossiping about this "poor relation" who was exhibited to them two or three times a year, and never met elsewhere in society, Fernande explained that the baroness lived in strict retirement by taste rather than necessity. M. de Soumans, according to Madame Mireille, had served in King Charles X.'s bodyguard, and his relict only associated, as a rule, with some old noblemen and ladies, mementoes, like herself, of the good old times. It was, therefore, only as an especial favour that she consented now and then to show herself in her young cousin's drawing-room, and to accompany her on some short trips into the country or abroad.

As the baroness was a woman of imposing aspect, no one ever doubted Madame Mireille's statements, which, after all, were only partially incorrect. In point of fact, the baroness did associate, preferentially, with people of her own age, and amongst them there were several persons who had once moved in the very best society; only they had unfortunately had the doors of fashionable mansions closed against them on account of sundry *pecadilloes*. Fernande, consequently, did not care to make their acquaintance, and, indeed, she never saw them. Whenever she wished to have a chat with Madame de Soumans, she wrote her a line, asking her to call upon her in the Rue de Lisbonne at a time of day when she knew that she would be alone. However, on the morrow of her quarrel with Valbourg, the young widow was so anxious to confide her worries and her plans to the only person in a position to understand them, that, in order to avoid any delay, she decided to pay her relative a visit.

Clorinde—her name was Clorinde, and fanciful as the appellation may seem, it was not unsuited to her—Clorinde, Baroness de Soumans, had resided from time immemorial in the Rue du Rocher, in the higher part of that steep thoroughfare which leads to that populous, outlying quarter of Paris, denominatated Courcelles. Her abode was suited to her habits, and it was on a par with the state of her purse. There was nothing stylish about the house, but it had the quiet, respectable air of an ordinary middle-class dwelling. Madame de Soumans was located on the fourth floor and her rooms overlooked a large garden where the sempiternal hum of Paris did not penetrate. An old servant woman sufficed for the requirements of the baroness, whose existence was quiet enough, apart from the fact that she received a very large number of visitors.

Madame Mireille, however, called but seldom upon her noble relative, probably because she was afraid of disturbing her, and whenever she did decide to repair to the Rue du Rocher, she always took good care to send a note in advance. In point of fact, the baroness had given her to understand that she detested unexpected visits, and Fernande respected her “fad” without trying to penetrate its cause. She had certainly asked herself, now and then, how Clorinde spent her time during nine or ten months of the year. The old lady was now sixty, at which age a woman has not a lover left her although she may have retained some friends. Still, even supposing that the baroness occasionally entertained the, now venerable, companions of her youth, that was surely no reason for surrounding herself with mystery. Madame Mireille had, finally, come to the conclusion that her elderly relative amused herself with various contemporaries of either sex, in playing endless games of “boston” or “loto”; and although she was not desirous of disturbing them, whilst engaged in such innocent recreation, she did not imagine, for a moment, that she would seriously grieve her cousin, even if she did happen to call upon her unexpectedly.

On the afternoon we have alluded to, Fernande felt sure of finding Madame de Soumans at home; for the weather was somewhat cold, and, save in the summer, the baroness seldom stirred from her fireside. Accordingly, the young widow dressed herself in simple style and went out on foot, at about four o'clock.

She had hoped, during the morning, that she would receive some submissive repentant letter from Jacques, which she would have been glad to answer with a plenary forgiveness. But nothing had come. Valbourg, on his side, had also expected a note, and, perhaps, he would now have made fitting terms of peace, had Fernande only taken the first step. But, to her mind, such a course was out of the question, and so war seemed to be formally declared. In fact, Madame Mireille was so irritated by Jacques' silence, that she determined to open hostilities without delay.

The mansion which her husband had left her, at his death, rose up close to the Parc Monceau, and to reach the Rue du Rocher she

must cross the Boulevard Malesherbes, where Valbourg lived. However, she was not tempted to proceed as far as his residence. Her irritation had reached such a point that she almost hoped she might meet him, so as to have the pleasure of giving him the cut, direct. But, as it chanced, she did not catch a glimpse of her faithless lover; he, no doubt, had something else to do than to wait and waylay her in the street.

Going up the Boulevard, Madame Mireille turned into the Rue le Monceau, and, on arriving in the Rue du Rocher, she merely had to cross over the way to reach her cousin's residence. As she visited Madame de Soumans quite openly, it was a matter of perfect indifference to her as to whether the passers-by looked at her or not. And, yet, she could not help feeling rather astonished, when two men, who were leaving the house as she entered it, turned and stared at her with marked persistence. A pretty woman is often exposed to this kind of thing, but there was something so strange about the manners of these two individuals that Fernande, for one moment, entertained the thought of turning round, on her side, and taking a good look at their faces; however, she had seen that they were poorly clad, and she came to the conclusion that folks of their description could not possibly know her. She, therefore, proceeded on her way without giving them another thought, and crossed the threshold of the house where Madame de Soumans perched high up on the fourth floor.

The doorway was small and the hall narrow; the staircase beyond was deficient both in majesty and light, being dimly illuminated by a gleam coming from above. However, Fernande had climbed to the fourth floor more than once, and as she never spoke to the doorkeeper, located in a dark cellar-like room near the entrance, she went swiftly along the hall, and darted nimbly up the winding stairs.

She had just reached the first landing, and would have continued the ascent without delay, for such a paltry climb was not calculated to exhaust the breath of such a vigorous young woman as herself, when suddenly a hand was laid upon her arm, and some one whispered in her ear a few words which she failed to catch.

Fernande was not easily alarmed, and the touch, however unexpected, failed to intimidate her. "Who are you, and what do you want of me?" she asked, freeing herself as she spoke.

"You don't know me, madame," the person who had touched her arm replied in a very soft voice. "Pray, come into my rooms. When you are there I will tell you why."

"What joke is this?" asked Fernande, drily. "Let me go upstairs or I shall summon the doorkeeper."

"In heaven's name, madame!" rejoined the stranger, "pray, don't do that. He is in league with them."

These words were articulated with such a show of emotion, that Fernande, instead of pushing the person, who had spoken, aside, in accordance with her first impulse, stopped short so as to ascertain whom she had to deal with. Her eyes were now growing accustomed

to the crepuscular light of the staircase, and she speedily perceived that the person in question was a woman.

"I don't understand you," began the young widow, haughtily. "What is the meaning—"

"You are going to see the baroness, are you not, madame?" interrupted the strange woman.

"Yes, I am going to see the Baroness de Soumans," retorted Fernande. "That is quite true, but I don't see—"

"The police are going to search her rooms—"

"The police! Why, you must be crazy!"

"No, indeed, madame, I swear to you that I am speaking the truth," replied the stranger. "There are some detectives in the street outside. You must have noticed them, for they passed very close to you. I was at my window behind the curtains, and I saw you as you approached the house—they also saw you, and one of them has just gone off to fetch the commissary of police, whilst the other one remains on the watch. In a few minutes' time they will enter the baroness's rooms, and if they found you there—"

"Well, supposing they did, what could possibly happen to me?" asked Fernande, without evincing any emotion.

"You would be lost, madame; don't you understand it? Are you not aware of what goes on at the baroness's?"

"I know nothing at all about it," answered Madame Mireille, in extreme astonishment.

"What! don't you know that she keeps a secret gambling saloon upstairs, and if that were all! Come, madame, come. You haven't a moment to lose. The police will soon be here, for the commissary's office is quite near by."

Fernande began to realise that the stranger was speaking seriously, and that the warning was a precious one, not to be neglected. "Very well," said she, "I thank you for having told me this—and I am going away at once."

"Oh! don't do that, madame," responded the stranger. "You would only make matters worse. There is a third detective secreted in the doorkeeper's room. He must have seen you go upstairs, and if he now saw you leave the house he might follow you so as to find out where you reside."

Fernande started. She now measured the danger she was running. The revelation she had first heard did not so greatly surprise her, for, as already stated, she had long been of opinion that there was something mysterious in the life which Clorinde led. However, she was anxious not to be compromised in any nefarious goings on, and she thought it would be better to avail herself for a time of the stranger's proffered hospitality.

"Are you alone in your rooms?" she asked.

"Quite alone, madame, I assure you," was the reply.

"Then I accept your offer, but on one condition—that you will at once warn Madame de Soumans that these men have designs against her."

"It is already done, madame. The spies came to an understanding this morning with the doorkeeper, who is under the orders of the prefecture of police like most fellows of the kind. I was passing along the hall and I recognised the detectives by their looks. They had come for some information so as to make a raid on the house. The baroness's visitors come every day from four to six, and the police no doubt expected that they would make a good haul this afternoon. However, I went and told Madame de Soumans of what I had seen and heard, and she has had time to send her servant to warn all the people who habitually visit her. As they won't come near the house to-day, the police will fail in their attempt."

"Very good—pray show me the way, and I will follow you," now said Madame Mireille.

"I live here on this floor, madame; you have merely a step to take to be in safety." So saying, the stranger pushed open a door which she had previously set ajar, and as soon as Madame Mireille had passed in, she closed it securely.

The rooms occupied by the person who was thus befriending the young widow were four in number, all of them small, and including a kind of boudoir overlooking the Rue du Rocher. Their appearance sufficed to show that they were furnished apartments. The faded reps of the sofa, the gincrack clock on the mantelshelf, and the common prints hanging on the walls, all unmistakeably bespoke the lodging-house.

However, Fernande paid but slight attention to the surroundings; she was anxious to take a look at the stranger who had accosted her on the landing, and when she turned with that object, she experienced intense surprise. The person who had so unexpectedly befriended her was a girl, certainly not more than twenty years of age; tall, slender, and simply attired in a dressing-gown of white cashmere. Her fair hair was well suited to her pale face—a lovely face with an expression of virginal simplicity. This young person was at once a flower of innocence and a marvel of grace.

"Perhaps I am mistaken though," thought Madame Mireille, gazing at the girl with a persistency that made her blush. "And yet Paris is so strange a city that everything may be found there—even virtue in furnished apartments in the Rue du Rocher."

"Will you do me the favour to sit down, madame," now said the girl. There was a sympathetic ring in her voice, and the gesture with which she punctuated her words was simply perfect.

"It isn't worth while," replied Fernande, still maintaining a cold demeanour. "I hope I shall soon be able to leave. But please tell me how you guessed that I intended going to see Madame de Soumans?"

"I had already seen you come here, madame. You have called two or three times since the beginning of the winter, and I happened to be at my window as I was to-day."

"You are often there it would seem."

"Yes, that's true. *I seldom go out, and my only recreation is reading. But these rooms are rather low and dark, and if I did not sit near the window I should not be well able to see.*"

"But that does not explain—"

"Why, I knew you were going to see the baroness. That is true, madame, but one day I was going upstairs to ask her to do me a favour when I met you outside her door."

"You have a remarkable memory I must say, mademoiselle."

"Well, hardly so—but you are so unlike the people who usually visit upstairs, that I could not help recollecting you."

"So you know Madame de Soumans?" asked Fernande.

"She has been kind enough to take some little interest in me," replied the girl, "but I don't go to her gatherings—I don't play, and I don't care to make fresh acquaintances. Still, I am indebted to Madame de Soumans in various ways, and I am very glad that I have been able to render a little service—to one of her friends. I almost foresaw to-day's affair, for on several occasions I had noticed some suspicious looking men prowling about the street. Had I known your address, madame, and been aware that you intended calling here to-day, I really believe that I should have mustered up sufficient courage to go and warn you of the danger."

Madame Mireille had listened in silence to these explanations which seemed plausible enough. "I thank you for your intentions, mademoiselle," she now said in a less frigid tone than before, "and now, may I take the liberty of asking you who you are?"

"My name is Marguerite," replied the girl who was evidently disturbed by Fernande's question.

"You will agree with me that that information is rather vague," retorted Madame Mireille with a smile.

"What good would it do for me to be more precise? We shall not see each other again, probably; and I can't venture to hope that you will remember me."

Fernande was about to insist on the subject, but Marguerite made her a sign to remain silent, and proceeded on tiptoe to the door. People were going up the stairs, as could be distinctly heard, and the noise was by no means calculated to set Madame Mireille at ease. She realised at once that the footsteps she could hear, were those of the police agents about to search her cousin's rooms, and she asked herself in alarm what would be the result of this adventure. "If they surprised me here," she thought "it would probably be even worse than if they found me in Clorinde's rooms. Who knows whether they are not after this girl? She wouldn't be so frightened if she had nothing to fear for herself."

However, at the expiration of a few moments, which seemed terribly long to the young widow, Marguerite came back, still upon tiptoe. "I was sure of it," said she. "It's the commissary with two detectives. I caught a glimpse of them through the keyhole. They have decided to search Madame de Soumans' rooms, but they won't have any reward for their trouble. She is now alone with

her servant, and early this morning she sent all her roulette appliances here. Nothing whatever will be found upstairs, and the police will hardly try this on again, for they must know very well that Madame de Soumans will remain on her guard, now that she has been warned by their visit to-day."

"I certainly hope that she won't expose herself to any more adventures of the kind," retorted Fernande hastily.

"She would act very wrongly if she did," was Marguerite's response, "for she will no doubt be watched, and the doorkeeper having denounced her once, will denounce her again."

"If she takes my advice she will move from the house," said Madame Mireille. "And as the road is now clear I shall go."

"I don't advise you to do that, madame. The third detective has remained in the doorkeeper's room, remember."

"All the same, mademoiselle, I can't remain here for ever," exclaimed Fernande impatiently.

"I can quite understand that you are anxious to get away," murmured Marguerite in reply. "Only I thought it best to point out the danger. Supposing that the detective who has been left on guard in the doorkeeper's room, should take it into his head to stop you on your way out, you would be obliged to answer his questions, and he would not fail to ask you for your name and address. So I think it best for you to remain here a few minutes longer. The commissary's visit cannot occupy much time. From the window here I shall see him go away with his men, and when I am satisfied that no one has remained in the house—"

"But there will always be the doorkeeper!" urged Madame Mireille.

"Oh! he isn't to be feared. He doesn't want to quarrel with Madame de Soumans."

"But you told me only just now that it was he who had denounced her."

"I fancy he did; but then he plays a double game. He is at the orders of the tenants although he betrays them. And as you will no doubt keep away from the house in future, madame—"

"I certainly sha'n't set my foot in it again. But even at the present moment—here—there is no proof that I am in safety."

"What! do you suspect me of being in league with the police? Oh! madame," exclaimed Marguerite; and tears came to her eyes.

"I did not say that, mademoiselle," replied Madame Mireille more graciously; "still if the commissary has entered Madame de Soumans' rooms, he may very well come here—Perhaps he has a right to do so."

The girl turned pale and at first made no answer. It seemed as though emotion prevented her from speaking. "You are mistaken, madame," she said at last, "I have not fallen so low as to give the police the right to enter my rooms."

"I believe you—I really wish to believe you--and yet, pray excuse me if I insist--but you live alone in these rooms."

"The furniture of which does not belong to me; that is true, madame."

"Then you are not married?"

"No, madame," replied Marguerite with a sigh.

"And young as you are, you don't live with your parents—or with some member of your family?"

"I am an orphan and I have no relatives left me."

"But some one must take an interest in you. At your age and in a city like Paris, a person doesn't live without friends, without protection."

"If you like to question Madame de Soumans, she will tell you that I don't receive any visits and that I seldom ever go out."

"Not even for your meals?" asked Fernande with a touch of irony. "Who waits on you then?"

"My meals are brought to me from a restaurant in the neighbourhood."

"But it isn't credible that you have always been in this position—so strange a one especially for a young girl."

"I have lived like this for a year."

"But you surely don't intend to persevere in such a life?"

"I am waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"For my fate to be decided."

"Then on whom or what does your fate depend?"

"Upon a man I loved," said Marguerite speaking with an effort.

"Ah! that's better. You are frank and I am glad to see it. And this man you speak of—he isn't near you to watch over you?"

"He is not in France."

"But he will come back again?"

"He promised me to do so, but I begin to think that he won't."

"And if he doesn't return?"

"In that case I shall die—oh! not of hunger, madame," sadly rejoined the young girl in response to a compassionate gesture which escaped Madame Mireille. "I have sufficient money left me for my wants—but I do not care for life."

"Then you love the person, you spoke of, very dearly?"

"Him! No, I hate him, the deceiver! But I cannot marry anyone else, and I will not fall lower than I have fallen!"

Whilst Fernande listened attentively to Marguerite's strange replies, she asked herself if she had not to deal with some skilful actress; and, before carrying the conversation any further, she would have been glad to ascertain if the girl were really sincere or merely playing a part.

"However, what good would it do for you to occupy yourself about me, madame?" Marguerite now resumed. "There is nothing interesting in my life. It is the old, old story, nothing more: as

Madame de Soumans can certify to you, for I did not hide anything from her when she questioned me."

"I am surprised that she has never mentioned you to me," said Madame Mireille.

"She could not foresee that chance would ever bring us together; and I assure you, madame, that if I had not thought I was doing you a service, I should never have ventured to stop you on the landing."

"I have no doubt of that," replied Fernande. "However, I suppose that Madame de Soumans never told you my name?"

"No, madame. I never asked her. Besides, I see her but seldom. Sometimes, she is kind enough to come down here to chat with me—and it also happens that I occasionally go upstairs; but never when she is with her friends, although she has then often suggested my coming."

"So her friends don't know you?"

"I see them at times from my window, but they have never seen me."

"So that if you left this house?"

"They could not say that I had resided here."

"And, as Madame de Soumans has treated you kindly, she will certainly not try to do you any harm. You could, therefore, change your life without fear of anyone reminding you of the past—"

"Change my life? What good would it do? Existence has no delights in store for me."

"Who knows?" answered Fernande.

This strange conversation with this problematical girl was exercising a kind of fascination over her. It seemed to her as if she were travelling through some unknown country. Marguerite looked charming; and in these dingy lodgings she seemed like some exiled queen staying at some chance hostelry and waiting for her crown to be brought back to her. And Madame Mireille began to wish that some brave knight, faithful to misfortune, would eventually restore her to her throne.

In the meanwhile, the situation was none the less critical. The commissary's visit was lasting a long time. What could now be transpiring on the fourth floor? Was not this girl mistaken in asserting that the perquisition would end in the rout and confusion of the police? Might it not rather have a fatal result for the adventurous baroness? Would she, Fernande, have the mortification of learning that her cousin had been sent off to the Prefecture of Police without the slightest ceremony? She already knew some strange stories about the relative whom she wished to consult; and she even asked herself if it would not be best for her to break off all connection with so compromising a person? However, for the time being, the matter uppermost in her mind was a longing to get out of the house.

"Won't these people ever leave?" she asked, impatiently. "Are you sure that you will see them go off?"

"I ought not to have left the window—I will return there at once," replied the girl, softly; and she again stationed herself in ambuscade behind the curtains.

Her gentle willingness touched Fernande, who, finally deciding to sit down in a well-worn arm-chair, exclaimed: "I shall never forget what you are doing for me."

"You would, no doubt, do the same for me, if you were in my position," answered Marguerite. "But don't be alarmed, madame. Before going off, the commissary has, no doubt, wanted to make sure that there is nothing suspicious in the rooms. And it must take some time to search the cupboards and closets. But he won't find anything, I'm sure. In the little room, where Madame de Soumans' friends usually play, there is now only a plain mahogany table. The baize cloth, the numbered *tableaux*, the rakes and the cylinder are all here—"

"And you are not afraid of the commissary coming to seize them here?" asked Fernande, apprehensively.

"Oh! not at all. Everything was very carefully managed. The servant was watching at the foot of the stairs whilst the baroness brought the forbidden paraphernalia here. The doorkeeper did not see anything; and Madame de Soumans did not meet a soul while she was running up and down the stairs. Ah!" added Marguerite, who, whilst speaking, had not taken her eyes off the window, "one of the detectives is going away by the Rue de Monceau. It is the one who was on guard in the doorkeeper's room. I recognize him."

"But the others, what of them?" hastily asked Fernande, at the same time rising to her feet, so as to be ready to leave the house.

"Oh! it won't be long before they follow their colleague. We shall soon hear them coming down the stairs and then I shall see them go off from here. Still, it would be better to wait a moment before you venture to—"

A ring at the front door of Marguerite's apartments abruptly curtailed her remarks; it was a loud, violent ring which fairly terrified Madame Mireille, and rooted her to the spot. Marguerite turned pale, and remained as motionless as Fernande. She, no doubt, vaguely hoped that the visitors, whoever they were, would retire without insisting. However, the bell was rung again, and this time even more violently than before.

One might write a physiological essay upon bell-ringing. There is the creditor's ring, the poor applicant's ring, the ring which resounds when your sweetheart pulls the rope. In the first case, there is something aggressive about the sound; in the second, you can distinguish timidity; in the third, the bell seems peculiarly musical, its tinkle is equivalent to a caress. This time, however, the ring was an authoritative one. When a person pulls at a bell rope so violently, it is as if he were speaking in an imperative style, it implies that he has a right to be admitted; such is the case when a commissary of police, in the discharge of his duties, is in question.

"It's the commissary," muttered Fernande. "I guessed as much."

She was in consternation, and began to bitterly regret having entered Marguerite's rooms. However, it was necessary for her to retain her presence of mind and cope with the danger at once.

The ringing began again, and this time it did not cease. "What is to be done?" resumed Madame Mireille.

"Fear nothing, madame," replied Marguerite. "I will take everything upon me; I will say that you made a mistake—there is a dressmaker overhead—you can pretend that you came to order a dress of her."

The bell was still ringing, and at the same time a succession of hasty taps resounded on the door.

"It is singular," said the girl, in a whisper. "that way of knocking. What, if it should be—"

"Open the door, mademoiselle. One must have done with it," interrupted Madame Mireille, who had now recovered some degree of self-possession.

"You are right. I regret having delayed."

Whilst Marguerite hastened towards the door, Fernande gathered her courage together, and composed an attitude. She no longer exaggerated the danger. After all, what would this commissary do as regards herself? Ask her for her name? She had decided to give it, realising very well that one never gains anything by refusing to answer a magistrate. The worst that might befall her would be a summons to prove that she had nothing to do with the occupant of these rooms and that she resided in a handsome mansion, her own property, in the Rue de Lisbonne. She need merely ask the commissary to have her accompanied there, and her appearance would suffice to ensure her courteous treatment. However, despite all this reasoning, her heart beat rather fast when the young girl opened the door. But she soon grew calm again, for she heard this exclamation: "What—is it you!"

"Why, yes, it's I!" replied a voice which Fernande immediately recognised. "What in heaven's name were you doing, my child? I have been ringing for the last five minutes. Has your sweethearts arrived from America?"

"No—but the commissary of police—I saw him," stammered Marguerite.

"And so did I, of course! But I precious soon sent him about his business. Let me in and I'll tell you all about it."

Marguerite stepped aside, and a tall, portly dame dashed into the boudoir, where she found herself face to face with Madame Mireille. "Fernande!" she exclaimed. "What! are you here?"

"Yes, indeed. You scarcely expected to see me, I suppose?"

"Expect to see you? Oh dear, no! And I even ask myself if I'm not dreaming. So you know Margot, it seems?"

"This is the first time I have ever met mademoiselle—but I am already under obligations to her—I was going up to your rooms,

when she stopped me to tell me that the police were about to search them."

"And you didn't care to meet the detectives, eh? You were afraid of walking into the lion's mouth? I can understand that! But what an idea to call here without a word of warning, and in 'school time' too!"

"In school time! I don't understand you," said Fernande.

"Why, yes. My friends call between four and six. We form a little gathering which I preside, and which we call the afternoon or evening class. However, so you have become acquainted with my little neighbour. She's charming, isn't she?"

"Charming and most kind-hearted. I'm sure I don't know what would have happened to me if mademoiselle had not offered me shelter here," replied Madame Mireille.

"Oh! nothing would have happened to you, and at least you would have witnessed a curious sight. You would have seen how I treated those scamps who dared to invade my rooms. No matter, you did quite right, Margot. It was a capital idea of yours, and I will reward you for the good turn you have done my cousin. And so you were watching for the commissary and his men, eh?"

"Yes, I was looking out of my window, madame. But as I thought they were still in the house I felt terribly frightened when I heard you ring."

"Aly so that's why you looked so queer when you opened the door—and Fernande wasn't any easier in mind than yourself. But compose yourselves, both of you, the police have gone off; and if Margot didn't see them leave, it must be that she left her observatory for a moment. After the reception I gave them they darted off like hares, and I didn't lose a moment to come down and see my obliging neighbour. However, as you are here, Fernande, we had better go upstairs together."

"No, no," rejoined Madame Mireille hastily.

"What, do you imagine that the police will come back again! That's a chimerical fear, my dear. I know all about those folks. They will come back again perhaps, in fact it's even probable; but not to-day, I'll answer for that. Besides, if you fear climbing to my fourth floor, I can go and see you whenever you like, for I mean to close my school for a time and give my pupils a holiday."

"That's the best course for you to follow," replied Fernande, "and I should feel obliged if you would come and see me as soon as possible, for—"

"But now I think of it you must have something important to tell me, for otherwise you would have written me a note instead of calling like this, unexpectedly."

"Yes, I have some news to tell you, and some advice to ask of you."

"Well then, let us go to the Rue de Lisbonne together. You came on foot I suppose. Well then, wait here while I get ready and I'll accompany you home."

"I prefer to go alone," said Fernande drily.

"I understand. You don't care to be seen with me in the street. You are perhaps right after what has just happened ; and I even advise you not to come to the Rue du Rocher again. But, after all, nothing prevents us from having a chat here before you go." And as Madame Mireille showed no haste in replying to these overtures, the baroness added gaily : "Not before Margot, of course. Besides, she is too intelligent and too good-natured to think of putting herself in our way. She will go and read a novelette in the Parc Monceau. It's fine weather, and you see she's already going to fetch a hat and a mantle."

Indeed the young girl had just entered her bedroom without saying a word ; and she speedily reappeared attired in a walking costume. "I shall have to be back in an hour's time," she remarked quietly, "for it will be nightfall by then."

"Quite so, my dear," replied the baroness ; "I shall have finished with my cousin, and you will find me here waiting for you. I mean you to dine with me. Constance is cooking something nice upstairs, and you shall give me your opinion about it."

"And as for me, mademoiselle," said Fernande, "I wish to tell you that I shall feel very happy indeed if I can do anything for you—"

"I thank you, madame," began Marguerite, "but—"

"No, no," interrupted the baroness, "don't let us have any affectation. You are not in need of any one, as I'm aware ; but a person never has too many real friends, and now you have a couple. We shall occupy ourselves about you, and you won't have any cause for complaint. Now, take our blessing with you and have a good walk. If you don't meet the husband you deserve, one of these days, it must be that all the millionaires in Paris have become fools."

The girl smiled at this sally, and bowed gracefully to Madame Mireille, who had half a mind to offer her her hand.

"Well, these are nice adventures," exclaimed Madame de Soumans as soon as Marguerite had closed the door behind her. "You must be pleased, as you like extravagant affairs !"

"Pleased ? No, indeed, I'm furious," replied Fernande, "and to tell the truth, I really don't understand your conduct, my dear Clorinde. What folly to attract the attention of the police !"

"I don't care a fig for the police ; still I can't help them from poking their noses into places where they have no business."

"To think that you have been keeping a gambling den ! It's incredible !"

"What do you call a gambling den, pray ? I'm fond of gambling, I admit it, and I receive people who are partial to play ; but what harm is there in that ?"

"The harm consists in profiting by the play," urged Fernande.

"Stop a bit, my dear," retorted the baroness. "I have a profound contempt for croupiers, and I don't ply their calling. If I did, I should be rolling in gold, whereas, to tell the truth, I'm

bourg, he might very well marry on his own side, so as to spite you."

" Oh ! I don't care for that in the least degree."

" Hum ! I really begin to think that you are cured of your infatuation. And, taking that to be the case, it seems to me that there must be some better means of revenging yourself upon him than what you just suggested."

" Perhaps so ; but what means ?"

" Let us examine this question ; but, first of all, I must sit down. I have been running up and down all day, and my legs are not as strong as they were forty years ago."

The baroness thereupon dropped on to a dingy sofa hard by, and Fernande, after some slight hesitation, decided to take a seat beside her. Clorinde was a well-preserved specimen of a race of women which has now-a-days well-nigh disappeared—the women who captivated the gilded youths of the reign of King Louis Philippe. She had not shone at the court of that citizen-monarch ; her husband's political opinions had prevented her from doing so. However, she had been the ornament of several drawing-rooms in the "Noble Faubourg," which were not over-select, or unduly punctilious, as regards morality. She had then been extolled for her beauty, her grace, and her distinguished manners, and even for her toilets, which had well-nigh ruined her husband. Those were the days when writers of the romantic school brought "aerial beauty" and ringing verse into fashion. Clorinde, herself, had never been aerial ; in fact, she had had a plump figure in her youth, and now she had become very stout, indeed ; however, she had once prided herself upon cultivating literature, and had even aspired to the title of "the tenth Muse." She had often read verses of her composition before select gatherings, and had also protected some good-looking young authors. However, these tastes of hers had fled away with the complexion of her youth ; and now, of all her attractions, there only remained to her a majestic presence, a keen, inventive mind, a frank disposition, and some little store of philosophy. She took snuff on the sly, but she wore corkscrew ringlets, which became her well, and dressed with taste, taking her age as it came, without trying to look either younger or older than she really was. Seated upon the sofa near her cousin, she now began to reflect, and Fernande waited for her opinion with some little impatience.

" Have you ever read Diderot's stories ? " suddenly asked the baroness.

" Diderot's stories ! " ejaculated Madame Mireille, who was at a loss to understand the meaning of this question.

" Yes ; 'Jacques, the Fatalist,' for instance."

" But what has Diderot to do with all this ? I don't care a bit about him."

" Then you are very wrong. First of all, Jacques is a suitable name ; there's quite a coincidence in the affair since Valbourg also is called Jacques. And if you saw the story I speak of, you would

read it to the last line. But, perhaps, you prefer other authors, Zola or Daudet."

"I must warn you, my dear Clorinde, that I am not disposed to listen to you if you intend to favour me with a lecture on literature."

"Oh ! don't fly into a pet. I'm coming to the matter which interests you. But first of all, you surely must have heard of the story of the Marquis des Arcis and Madame de la Pommeraye."

"Perhaps I have, but I don't remember—"

"Well, the story is given in 'Jacques the Fatalist.' The Marquis des Arcis and Madame de la Pommeraye, who are lovers, quarrel—just as you have quarrelled with Valbourg—and the heroine swears to be revenged upon the marquis just as you have sworn to be revenged upon Jacques."

"Ah ! and how does she manage ?" asked Madame Mircille, who was beginning to feel interested. "She marries I suppose ?"

"No, no. Her revenge is far more refined. She finds a wife for her deceitful lover."

"Oh ! Valbourg will marry, sure enough, without my meddling in the matter. He threatened me to do so."

"Perhaps he did, but he would like to marry a well-conducted young girl, whereas Madame de la Pommeraye's revenge consisted in marrying Monsieur des Arcis to a disreputable character. Now suppose you did something similar as regards Valbourg. I don't know of any better revenge than that."

"It would certainly only be what he deserves," replied Fernande. "But he isn't such a fool as to let himself be duped as your marquis was. He wouldn't marry without making full inquiries."

"I daresay. But the information one obtains in such cases isn't always reliable," replied the baroness. "People are deceived every day. Your husband, Mircille, was already reputed to be wealthy when you gave him your hand, but, in reality, he then had but a very small fortune."

"No doubt one may be deceived as regards money matters," said Fernande, "but it is different with a woman's past life and reputation ; and Valbourg isn't the man to marry a person whom he knows to be disreputable."

"Oh ! I quite agree with you so far as that goes ; but he must be allowed to imagine that the girl he marries has always led a blameless life. Then, during the honeymoon, you must be in a position to prove that his wife misconducted herself before the marriage. Her antecedents can easily be hidden for a time—that is until you have a good opportunity to strike the fatal blow."

"But remember that Valbourg wouldn't marry the first comer. If he decided to take a wife so as to spite me, he would need one with a large fortune, and of noble descent."

"Oh ! such a girl can be found. I know one who could captivate a king if she only chose to try—she is well-born but she has lost caste—and the necessary millions are lacking ; still Valbourg might be inclined to dispense with *them* if he were really in love."

It would suffice for the marriage to flatter his vanity. The girl in question must be of noble birth remember, and she must occupy a prominent position in the society he frequents."

"But how could she obtain admission into society if she has lost caste?"

"I made a mistake in saying that; it amounts to this, she isn't known."

"Well, people who are not known, are not invited into society."

"Yes they are, if they have proper chaperones and sponsors. The foreign women who arrive in Paris from every corner of the world and perch themselves in the big mansions round about the Arc de Triomphe, have no connections at the outset, but they soon acquire a footing and a very good one too. As they are wealthy, many respectable ladies of tolerant principles are only too willing to patronize them. They obtain chaperones in the Faubourg St. Honoré and even in the Faubourg St. Germain, and they only have to choose. Once duly provided in this respect, they open their drawing-rooms, give fêtes, and people of good position readily accept their invitations."

"But these foreign women have husbands, families, people around them, at all events. Folks know where they come from and what their means are."

"Not always," rejoined the baroness with a smile.

"Well, never mind that point," said Madame Mircille, "but when there is any question of a Parisian marrying one of these women, he makes inquiries about her."

"About her pecuniary position, yes; and if she can prove that she has a considerable sum at her banker's, her suitor doesn't go to Russia or America to inquire into the precise amount of her fortune."

"Oh! he doesn't go there, perhaps; but he asks his notary to write; and it seems to me, my dear Clorinde, that you talk very lightly about a very serious subject. Now-a-days people don't marry in haste to repent at leisure. Love matches are becoming more and more infrequent. And besides, I don't quite understand what you are driving at with your talk about the foreign adventuresses who settle in Paris, and I must ask you to come to the point—Valbourg."

"I am getting to it; but, first of all, how much would you give to be able to play Valbourg much the same trick as Madame de la Pommeraye played the Marquis des Arcis."

"What a question! To listen to you one would think that such things are planned out just like plays are set upon the stage."

"Well, it comes to much the same. There are certain attendant expenses which cannot be got rid of. The future Madame Valbourg must be 'brought out'—that's the technical term you know—in fitting style, and the matter will cost you a handsome sum. I tell you that because you must decide whether you will go to the expense or not."

Madame Mireille smiled and after a short pause she retorted : " Come, Clorinde, I really think that I am dreaming when I hear you talking in so serious a fashion of what can merely be a chimerical dream. However, you amuse me and I should like to know what course you would suggest. Let us suppose that the hussy you speak of is found and located in the neighbourhood of the Champs Elysées. She occupies some handsome, well-furnished rooms, we will say ; and now all that she lacks is an introduction into society. Do you intend to furnish her with one personally ? "

" No, indeed," said the baroness, " for as you are well aware, I no longer go into society ; and besides, Valbourg would mistrust me. However, I know a friend who would take my place most advantageously."

" Some one who attends your 'afternoon school ?'" asked Fernande, with a dash of irony in her tone.

" Not at all. A countess—a real one—who has a brilliant circle of acquaintance."

" And if she consents to chaperone this girl, what will she say about her ? "

" She will say that this young girl, her distant relative, belongs to an old French family which emigrated to Canada a couple of centuries ago. Having lost her mother, she has come to settle in Paris, where she wishes to find a husband. It will be explained that she possesses extensive property in America and that she has a considerable sum of money deposited, on current account, at the Bank of France."

" And you imagine that people will for one moment believe such a parcel of lies ? "

" What do you mean ? These are no lies ; they will be so many truths, as soon as you deposit the necessary sum on current account at the bank."

" I sha'n't deposit it until I am fully informed at all events. Besides, you speak of a girl you know, who could captivate a king if she chose, who is possessed of all kinds of physical and moral gifts. Well, that being the case, what should I gain by letting Valbourg marry her ? "

" You forget that her life has not always been blameless, or perhaps, I forgot to mention that point."

" Ah, indeed ! So we are coming to the point at last."

" Yes, we are ; and I am surprised that you, quick witted as you usually are, have not yet guessed that I have been referring to Margot all through."

" To Margot," repeated Madame Mireille, " pray, who is Margot ? "

" Margot is my charming neighbour," replied the baroness. " The good-natured girl who gave you shelter here to prevent you from meeting the commissary of police. I call her Margot in intimacy, but her real name is Marguerite."

"I know that, for she told me so herself," remarked Fernande. "And so that is the girl whom you want to make Valbourg marry."

"That girl, if you please, my dear, is of much better birth than yourself; for although your father may have been a general, your grandfather was a petty horsedealer, whereas her ancestors were Norman noblemen who emigrated to Canada in the days of the fourteenth Louis. She is a Cambrenier, and there was a Cambremer among the followers of William the Conqueror."

"I am quite disposed to believe it and perfectly willing to congratulate his descendant; but as for the property she pretends to possess in America, does it really exist?"

"Yes, it does, and what is more, I have seen her title deeds. She owns a large tract of land out there, on the banks of the St. Laurent or the Red River, I don't remember which. Only the land yields nothing as it has not yet been cleared."

"And you expect that Valbourg will undertake to clear it. What an idea!"

"Laugh as much as you like, my dear, but hear me out. Marguerite's mother, who was a widow, died a couple of years ago, and left her a hundred thousand dollars."

"And she lives in such a place as this? What has she done with her money then?"

"Ah! there's the rub—she spent it for a lover with whom she ran away. That's the stain you were so anxious to hear about."

"And a terrible one it is too," said Madame Mireille, pensively.

"Well, this lover of hers, it seems, had discovered, somewhere or other, a gold mine, or a coal mine, I don't know which. He ruined himself in trying to work it, and Marguerite, to enable him to continue operations, lent him, or rather gave him, all or nearly all the money she possessed."

"She must have been defrauded."

"Perhaps so, and yet she asserts that this Canadian is an honest fellow at heart—for her lover is a Canadian I must tell you."

"And she has left him in America! Why didn't he marry her?"

"Because he couldn't, I suppose. He has gone off searching for a fortune in some outlandish country, and hasn't seen fit to let Margot share his adventurous life. In fact, he sent her to Paris, promising that he would join her; but she has now been waiting for him, for a whole year; and hope deferred, you know, maketh the heart sick."

"I am aware of that, but how has she lived since she has been here in Paris?"

"She arrived with a thousand louis or so which she had saved from the wreck, and she is slowly spending them—slowly, indeed, for I feel sure that her outlay is under five hundred francs a month. She might go on for two years at that rate, without needing anyone's help. And yet she is coquettish; only she had a complete trousseau on her arrival, and so, as she doesn't go into society, she hasn't had to spend any money on dress."

"And is it really true that she leads a quiet life?"

"Perfectly true, my dear. She only goes out to take a little fresh air in the *Parc Monceau*, and not a soul visits her excepting myself. She has taken quite a fancy to me I must tell you, and has made me her confidante. She is really a very singular girl; she says whatever she thinks and tells one whatever she does. She might easily have concealed her true story from me, but she told me everything and furnished proofs. Pray note that she has a relative, here in Paris—a relative who, had she chosen, would have received her with open arms—the Countess de Serq."

"Madame de Serq! Why, I meet her in society!" exclaimed Fernande. "She is a widow, she is very rich and she has no children."

"Quite correct. Well, a few years ago Marguerite visited France with her mother. The countess received them in the best style, petted them and took them about everywhere."

"And the foolish girl didn't go and see the countess on her return to Paris. She preferred shutting herself up in these wretched rooms. It's incredible!" ejaculated Fernande.

"All the same it is a fact!" retorted the baroness. "And besides, you forgot the lover. Marguerite relied upon her Canadian at that time, and did not wish to show herself in public until she had married him. Now, however, she has lost all hope of that, and one of these fine mornings she may very well call upon Madame de Serq. She does astonishing things at times, in the most abrupt fashion."

"But Madame de Serq would refuse to see her."

"No, she wouldn't, for she is not aware of her young cousin's escapade; besides the matter did not occasion any stir worth speaking of, even in Canada. All that the countess knows is that Madame de Cambremer is dead, so that if Marguerite wrote to her, telling her that she had just arrived at the *Grand Hotel*, the old lady would hurry there at once. Marguerite could then explain to her, that, finding herself alone in the world, she had decided to leave America and seek her protection. Now Madame de Serq would be delighted to chaperon her in society. She is such a worldly being, poor thing, and she has always regretted not having a daughter of her own. Marguerite would furnish her with a pretext for going to balls which she no longer dares to attend on account of her age. Naturally too, she would be anxious to secure a good husband for Mademoiselle de Cambremer, and in view of succeeding in that respect, she might even promise to leave her her fortune."

"You have a lively imagination, I must say, my dear Clorinde. To hear you talk one would really fancy that everything was already settled. However, Madame de Serq, before consenting to patronise a young girl whom she has lost sight of for several years, would necessarily wish to know how she was situated as regards money."

"Certainly she would ; and so I again return to the great question. Are you disposed to make a pecuniary sacrifice so as to revenge yourself upon Valbourg ?"

"I would give half my fortune !" exclaimed Fernande impulsively.

"That would be too much. But to return to what you were saying just now, Mademoiselle de Cambremer ought to be located in the vicinity of the Champs Elysées, in a *stylish* manner, befitting a rich heiress. I fancy that the preliminary expense in that respect would amount to fifty thousand francs."

"Oh ! fifty thousand francs wouldn't stop me if I were sure of attaining my object," said Madame Mircille.

"Well," resumed the baroness, speaking slowly, "I think also that Mademoiselle de Cambremer ought to be able to prove that she possesses the hundred thousand dollars which her mother left her ; the money spent on preliminary expenses being deducted therefrom, as a matter of course."

"A hundred thousand dollars !" said Madame Mircille, with a pretty pout. "That's a considerable sum."

"Well, if you wish to obtain your object, you must be prepared to provide the means. And besides you will have to lend personal assistance if the scheme is to be worked properly. You must receive Mademoiselle de Cambremer at your house and vaunt her qualities everywhere. You might even pretend to forgive Valbourg, so as to induce him to come to some of your receptions. And who knows ?—he may ask you for some information about this new star which Madame de Serq will be promenading through the Parisian firmament."

"But supposing that this star shouldn't dazzle him ?"

"What ! didn't you look at her ?"

"She is extremely pretty, I don't say the contrary, but—"

"And her beauty is nothing compared to her wit. I know all about such things. If she only chose she could fascinate the most mistrustful man—the most *blasé* sceptic upon earth."

"If she chose—*you* say—but will she choose ?"

"You have hit the right nail on the head. But I will undertake to drive it home. Margot opened her heart to me this very morning. She is weary of the life she is leading, and she is thoroughly incensed with that Canadian who has jilted her. However, on the other side, she is hesitating between two courses : either to go and tell Madame de Serq the whole truth, and ask for her advice and assistance ; or else to go to the bad. Now if she is left to herself I am afraid she will be obliged to take the latter course, for, if she told the whole truth to the countess, the latter would refuse to have anything to do with her. However, the question is whether, supposing I take her in hand, she will find Valbourg to her liking ?"

"And if she will be willing to act the comedy you propose."

"Oh ! she would refuse the part if I told her the precise truth,

but I sha'n't do that. I have an explanation, all ready. She has rendered you a very great service, and it is only natural that you should want to reward her. As you are very rich, you are able to facilitate her return into society, with an advantageous marriage to boot, by placing the money, she may need, at her disposal. You will lend it her, so as not to hurt her feelings. She will give you a receipt in proper form, a receipt which you must not show to anyone, and she will pay you back—when her property in Canada brings in some money."

"You might as well say 'never.' But, no matter. Five hundred thousand francs won't ruin *me*. However your scheme is still faulty in one respect. Supposing that Valbourg does marry this girl, will that be any great punishment for him? If I am not mistaken, the marquis in the story you spoke of just now, married a thoroughly degraded creature, whereas your friend, Mademoiselle de Cambremer, only has to reproach herself with a fault—which her youth and various circumstances might palliate, if not wholly excuse."

"Oh! Valbourg would never excuse her! I'll answer for that. When I send him a certain packet of letters written by the Canadian to Marguerite, your vengeance will be equal to Madame de la Pommerye's."

"Have you got those letters then?"

"Yes, I have. Margot gave me them to take care of; and she won't claim them again when she leaves this house. She won't care to take such compromising documents with her to her new abode. But, what's more, I've read the letters. There is a lot to be learnt in them. They are all aglow with love, quite fiery. And there's nothing wanting, the money squandered by the Canadian is mentioned in them, and Valbourg will learn that his wife, prior to their marriage, spent a fortune on a lover."

"He will kill himself—or else kill her," said Fernande, shuddering.

"Oh! Margot won't let herself be suppressed. But, come, what do you think of my little scheme? One can always try it. Margot still has money enough to take up her abode at a decent hotel, and then to call on Madame de Serq. If the latter, as I feel sure, gives her a good reception, you can then supply the necessary funds. For my own part I shall retire into the slips, and secretly prepare a meeting between Monsieur Valbourg and Mademoiselle de Cambremer. Is it agreed?"

A short spell of silence followed.

"Well, yes," finally said Madame Mireille, with an effort. "Jacques has wounded me beyond forgiveness. I abandon him to you. Dishonour him."

"I will undertake to do that!" exclaimed the pitiless baroness. "And while I am about it, I shall perhaps be able to find you a husband worth more than he is. And now that everything is settled, my dear, there is no occasion for you to remain here.

Margot will be coming home ; I shall have to talk to her at once ; and you would be in my way. You must retain your full prestige in the affair. I will go to see you to-morrow and tell you the result of my chat with the little one."

" All right. I shall be at home all day," replied Madame Mireille, rising from the sofa.

The staircase was now free, the doorkeeper was dozing in his little room at the end of the hall, there were no detectives, easily to be recognised by their shabby clothes and prying eyes, in the street outside ; and Fernande walked back to her mansion in the Rue de Lisbonne without meeting with any mishap. The die was cast ; she had decided upon vengeance ; and everything now depended upon the result of Madame de Soumans' chat with Marguerite de Cambremier.

III.

THREE weeks had elapsed since the quarrel between Jacques and Fernande, and Valbourg, standing on the boulevard outside the Théâtro des Variétés, was finishing a cigar which he had lighted at his club.

There was a first performance that night at the theatre dear to all lovers of opera bouffe, and Valbourg, since the quarrel, had not missed a single similar solemnity. His life was changed, he felt bored to death, and in addition he was anxious that Fernande should imagine that he was quite consoled for her loss. However, whilst doing his duty as a patron of the stage and the ballet--the ballet especially—he by no means forgot his various schemes. In fact, he seemed to take a greater delight than ever in sharing the society of the predatory Galician nobleman, M. de Bolgos.

On the evening now referred to, they had dined together at their club, and had strolled side by side to the theatre, smoking and chatting on the way. They had retained a couple of stalls on the day before, and they meant to finish the night at the masquerade ball at the grand opera house. They had, indeed, become boon companions, and some acquaintances who had remarked their intimacy, had already nicknamed them "Orestes" and "Pylades."

M. de Bolgos, the honourable employer of Justin, the valet, was sincerely delighted with this intimacy, which he did his best to make closer and closer, hoping that he would some day derive considerable advantage from it. Valbourg, however, though he outwardly put a good face on the matter, only kept up the connection with a strong feeling of repugnance. Indeed, he was like a man who resigns himself to undergoing an extremely disagreeable but most salutary operation. He relied on this Galician knight of the road to enable him to wreak vengeance upon Fernande, and he was patiently throwing up his batteries pending the proper time to open fire. He was even trying to find an opportunity for beginning hostilities, but none had been offered so far; and accordingly he confined himself to studying Bolgos, sounding the ground by chatting to him about Madaine Mireille, and so regulating his speech and conduct as to let him suppose that his praise of the wealthy and charming widow was perfectly disinterested.

The count, on his side, appeared to believe all that Valbourg told him; and he even seemed disposed to renew his acquaintance with

Fernande, which acquaintance, so he said, he had dropped, he hardly knew how or why. Thus everything was progressing to Valbourg's liking, and he no longer doubted the truth of his valet's assertions. Justin was now on his master's side, as he well proved by keeping him accurately informed as to all the suspicious manœuvres of the Galician magnate.

However, to return to the evening with which we have to deal, Valbourg and Bolgos stood chatting together on the broad footway before entering the Variétés theatre, and whilst they loitered there, more than one passer-by or loiterer turned to look at them. Indeed, they were both calculated to attract notice anywhere. Valbourg had the stature and bearing of a cavalry officer—of one of those dashing captains who are as much at home in a drawing-room as in a barracks; and the count, on his side, was equally if not more noteworthy. In fact he was taller than his companion, slimmer, and of more elegant bearing. He belonged to a different race: that of the fair-haired foreigner with a creamy complexion and large blue eyes, who throws the Parisian damsels into ecstasies. He had the haughty look, mingled with the careless gracefulness of a true nobleman, and no one who saw him would have taken him for anything else.

Both duly attired in evening dress, over which they wore long overcoats with fur collars, they stood gazing at the frontage of the theatre, which was ablaze with light, and at the women who lightly darted up the steps of the peristyle; whilst now and anon they cast glances at the spurious mashes who were airing their shirt fronts on the asphalt so that every one might know that they had their seats retained for this theatrical solemnity.

"Aren't you of opinion, my dear Valbourg," suddenly remarked M. de Bolgos, "that the audiences of first performances have greatly changed? Formerly all the people in society came to such affairs, and since we have been standing here we ought to have exchanged bows with a score of people of our acquaintance. However, for my own part, I have only seen some hussies flanked by South Americans, grown rich on guano, together with a sprinkling of provincials who are doing the 'lions,' and some young whipper-snappers who fancy that they can acquire a position in fashionable society by paying two louis for a bracket seat."

"The fact is, my dear count, that there seem to be very few pretty women this evening," replied Valbourg. "Now-a-days, however, first performances are never noteworthy for a display of beauty. On Tuesdays at the Comédie Française, and now and again at the Opéra, some belles of society may be seen showing their shoulders; but first performances, no matter what may be said to the contrary, have, as a rule, gone out of fashion. The only women you see at them are, as you just remarked, a parcel of hussies who hope that they will find their names recorded in the *Figaro* or the *Gil Blas* on the morrow. For my own part, I'm sick of seeing them."

"And so am I. The fact is I am settling down. A bad sign, perhaps, but then I'm growing old, and the proof of it is that I sometimes think of making an end of it all."

"Take care, my dear fellow—if that is the case you are on the high road to matrimony."

"I fear I am—and shall I confess it? I would willingly continue in that direction if I could only find what I should like. A large dowry, or at all events, one equal to my own fortune, and a woman I could care for."

"Are you particularly desirous that she should belong to the aristocracy like yourself?" asked Valbourg.

"Oh, no! not at all. You know very well that I have no prejudices. Besides, the person I should marry would bear my name, and as you are aware the flag covers the merchandise. The name is everything. I know a duchess who holds her rank very well in the noble faubourg and yet her father was a simple fishmonger."

"Well I know women of the middle classes whose fathers were not shopkeepers, who are well off and who would only esteem themselves too fortunate if they could bear the title of Countess de Bolgos."

"Point one of them out to me then, my dear fellow. Your indications would suffice for me to come forward as a suitor. I would marry a woman with my eyes shut, provided you only recommended her."

Valbourg had a certain name on the tip of his tongue but he took care not to articulate it. Such a step would have been premature, and so he decided to adopt round-about but safer tactics.

"I won't fail to point out to you any persons who may be worthy of your attention," he said with a smile, "but only on condition that you do the same for me, for I am willing to admit that I also am tired of a bachelor life."

"That's hard to believe," replied the count, "for recently you have been going about wherever any amusement is offered."

"Yes, I try to amuse myself but I don't succeed," said Fernande's whilom lover. "Like yourself I am getting to an age when a man thirsts for peaceful happiness. It is better to make the plunge at once than to wait for the time when one has no thirst left."

"That's my own opinion. Only as regards yourself, I thought that you were engaged—if not formally—at least in intention."

"Oh! no," rejoined Valbourg hastily, by way of preventing a thrust which he foresaw. "I have flirted a good deal like everyone else, and I have, at times, been stupid enough to let no one that I was on the best of terms with such and such a thought. Valit was sheer vanity, nothing more. Among us didn't answer him, once there were certainly one or two who understand each other, and have married, but I will frankly confess features. Justin must be in love me." grandee should be reduced

"Indeed! were they so hard to get on the boulevard. He is

Bolgos. "Without flattery, my dear fellow, it seems to me that you might aspire—But dear me," he added breaking off in the midst of his remarks—"what do you say to that person?" and at the same time he designated a young woman who was alighting from a carriage a few steps off.

The person referred to lightly set foot on the asphalt, and then offered her hand to an elderly lady who was preparing to follow her out of the vehicle.

"She is charming," muttered Valbourg "and I fancy it is the first time that I have ever seen her. Do you happen to be acquainted with her?"

"No; but perhaps I know the respectable party who is with her," said the count. "I shall feel sure on that point when I have taken a better look. But let us step back so as to enable them to pass. This side walk is so crowded that they don't know how to reach the theatre."

The two women passed by, the elder one leaning on the arm of her young companion; and by the light of the gas, illuminating the frontage of the Variétés, Valbourg and Bolgos were able to take a good look at them.

"Why, she's a perfect marvel, that girl!" exclaimed Valbourg as his eyes followed the retreating couple. "And you say that you know her mother?"

"The person with her isn't her mother," replied the count. "That elderly dame is the Countess de Serq, a widow who has never had any children. You must have met her in society."

"Yes, in point of fact I fancy I remember having done so, still I was never introduced to her. But the girl—she has a Madonna-like face, and eyes, such I have seldom seen. Who can she be?"

"Well, upon my word, I can't guess where she has come from—unless she has freshly left some convent school. Perhaps she is some niece whom the countess has just taken away from that renowned establishment the 'Sacred Heart,' and whom she means to bring out in society. But no; that can't be the case, for she wouldn't bring a young girl, a perfect novice, to the Variétés to hear Judic warble questionable songs. Let me take a glance at their carriage before it drives away—Ah! it isn't Madame de Serq's—The worthy old lady's conveyance is a relic of the past century, whereas that brougham there looks as though it had been hired at Brion's. So the countess's companion is probably some foreign beauty who has recently arrived in Paris—yes, indeed, now I ~~beautify~~ it. I was told a story about her only yesterday."

again at the ~~beautify~~ it was it?" asked Valbourg at once, "I wish you shoulders; but in ~~beautify~~ it beauty with the Madonna-like face really the contrary, have, as a rule, you see at them are, as you of note and, besides, the story was hope that they will find the ~~beautify~~ it you during the first "wait," said Gil Blas on the morrow. Old do as well to take our seats. them."

house must be full already, and if we delay any longer, we may find ourselves blocked up in the passages."

"You are right," replied Valbourg, "and besides I am anxious to see this new star again—she flashed past me like a meteor. I have an excellent pair of glasses and, providing she is in some box, I sha'n't lack entertainment this evening, however dull the piece may be. Come, let's go in."

For half a minute or so Monsieur de Bolgos had seemed less attentive to the conversation. He was looking at some loiterers standing on the left hand near a newspaper-vendor's kiosk, people who ought not to have interested him, for they seemed to be mere loafers anxious to earn a copper or two by opening carriage doors. Suddenly, however, one of these fellows shuffled up to the count with an impudent air, and abruptly said: "Will you give us a light, your highness?"

The count calmly held out the fag end of his cigar which he had been on the point of throwing away; and the man who had addressed him so impertinently, took it between his dirty fingers and tried to relight a frightful halfpenny smoke which had gone out. He seemed to be a long while about it, and Valbourg, who remained slightly in the rear, fancied by the movement of the fellow's lips that he was not merely taking a pull at his weed.

"I could almost swear that that vagabond is whispering something to Bolgos," thought Fernande's discarded lover. "Is he one of the members of the gang, which the count commands, according to Justin? Perhaps so; for the fellow looks like a thorough scamp and he has quite the build of a garotter."

"Thanks, prince," grumbled the loafer at last, "I pull and pull but I can't get this smoke of mine alight. How the tobacconists *do* rob poor people, to be sure!" And thereupon he handed M. de Bolgos his cigar again; but the count flung it disdainfully upon the side-walk. Upon seeing this the fellow picked up the half consumed Havana and began to smoke it, saying: "Don't be put out, General, I don't mind smoking after you. It's deuced fine this cigar of yours. You must have paid at least sevenpence halfpenny for it."

M. de Bolgos made no rejoinder but turned upon his heels, whereupon the loafer shuffled off. His language and his manners were those of a rough of the worst kind, and the more Valbourg examined him the more acutely his suspicions were aroused. The count was not usually gracious towards people of the lower classes, whom he in fact generally kept at a respectful distance, and it was therefore strange that he should have been so forbearing with this dirty rascal who had ventured to ask him for a light.

"That fellow whispered something to the count," thought Valbourg, "I am sure of it. It's true that Bolgos didn't answer him, but a wink suffices between people who understand each other, and I wasn't able to see my noble friend's features. Justin must be right, but it's singular that this Galician grandee should be reduced to receiving the reports of his hirelings on the boulevard. He is

playing a risky game, and one of these fine day she will be caught. I only hope that the bomb won't explode too soon! Fernande wouldn't be struck by the splinters, they would all fly in my face—for I have shown myself about with him everywhere during the last three weeks. Ah! I've no time to lose if I want to arrange that marriage. Bolgos acts as though he would take the bait. I now only need an opportunity, and I shall certainly end by finding one; for I hear it said that Madame Mireille is again going about in society. The first time I see her I shall go up to her boldly. Besides, it is necessary that I should do so, for otherwise people might suspect that there had been something between us. She will certainly favour a renewal of the acquaintance, for, like myself, she will realise the necessity of deceiving inquisitive folks. If I could only see her this evening everything would go upon wheels. I have Bolgos with me and he knows Madame Mireille well enough to accompany me on a visit to her box. He confessed to me only just now that he thought of marrying; and on the one hand he's just the fellow to attract a woman's attention, whilst on the other Fernande has a couple of million francs. She would be willing to marry him if only in hope of spiting me. And, besides, I know what I have got to say. I have been studying my part during the last three weeks."

This mental soliloquy was interrupted by M. de Bolgos, who had not opened his mouth since throwing away the fag-end of his cigar.

"Well, are we going in?" he asked. "I half believe that the curtain is up already. But what are you thinking of, my dear fellow? You seem preoccupied."

"Not at all," answered Valbourg. "I was looking at that loafer who is going off, and admiring his impudence. I shouldn't have been as mild as you were."

"Rubbish! You can never refuse any one a light. And, besides, those Parisians of the pavement amuse me."

"Well, I shouldn't care to meet that one on the outer boulevards at three o'clock in the morning."

"Nor I either; but as I never go home on foot at night time, I don't fear mishaps. My system of taking a cab is a good one, and I advise you to follow it. When a fellow has won a lot of money at his club, and goes off with his pockets full, it is dangerous to walk home."

"Oh! I live quite close to the club," retorted Valbourg, "whereas, with you it's different. Your neighbourhood, the Champs-Elysées, is quite deserted after midnight. But here we are chatting again and we shall have to tread on the toes of a dozen spectators to reach our seats."

As they had foreseen, they had considerable difficulty in getting to their stalls. The auditorium was crowded, and people were standing up and lounging about. The doors of the boxes could be heard, being opened and closed; and in the dress-circle there was a clatter of footstools pushed aside by late arrivals.

Among the occupants of the stalls, there were a few clubmen who

had come to the sight out of habit, it being customary for them to attend all the first performances in Paris, either for the sake of the solemnities themselves, or for that of some red-haired actress with black eyes. The dramatic critics, also, were in the stalls in serried array, and here and there were scattered minor reporters, those who "do" the house, chronicling the names and the toiletts of the more prominent spectators, whilst their exalted colleagues confine their attention to what transpires upon the stage. In the boxes there were a number of women—several more or less connected with the world of literature and art; some ultra-fashionable dames; a squadron of damsels, of whom the less said the better; and various relatives of actors and actresses.

Valbourg, who was an old campaigner as regards such matters, did not lose his time in passing a review of the audience, for it comprised all the people invariably seen on such occasions—folks whose attendance is suggestive of clock-like regularity, and who seem to be paid for viewing the performance, just as the actors are paid for giving it. Fernande's ex-lover had something better to do than to scan the faces of people he met every fortnight or so, accordingly, he sought for his beauty with the Madonna-like face, and he soon espied her in a box on the principal tier. Forthwith he turned his glasses upon this star which now shone in full glory, and he examined it like an experienced astronomer who is not simpleton enough to take a mere nebula for a planet of the first quality. He fancied he knew all about stars of this description, but he was soon forced to confess that he had never before beheld one equal to the beauty at whom he now gazed.

This youthful flower had certainly not sprouted upon the banks of the Seine. There is something indescribable about the features of a Parisienne, a mobility which distinguishes her from other women. You are never quite certain whether she is beautiful or even merely pretty. The "ensemble" is charming, but you must not take it to pieces or else the illusion will fade away. You end by discovering that the damsel's forehead is too high or too low; that her mouth is too large or too small, that her eyes are not blue but grey, that the shape of her nose is not regular, and that her hair is of no decided tint. The Parisiennes are neither brunettes nor blondes nor even what is called "carrotty." They are like certain politicians, there is nothing decided about them.

However, the stranger whom Valbourg was now scanning, was a genuine beauty, a diamond of the best water, capable of supporting the closest scrutiny. There was nothing faulty about her face which seemed to have been modelled on that of a Grecian statue, and yet it beamed with life and restrained ardour. Leaning on the edge of her box, this young girl was gazing indifferently at the motley throng which filled the auditorium, and it was easy to be seen that her large dreamy eyes did not expect to recognise a single friend. She was evidently a stranger, a foreigner, knowing no one in Paris save her companion. Her toilet was somewhat

eccentric. She wore a skirt of soft white silk covered with flounces of Malines lace, and a kind of jacket, made of *lampas*, figured blue and silver, adorned with bows of hydrangea-tinted satin and flanked by *paniers* of eighteenth century style. She did not wear a single jewel nor had she any flowers either on her bosom or in her hair. However, in her right hand, which was remarkably well gloved, she held a costly fan of antique design.

"Well, what do you think of her, my dear fellow?" suddenly asked M. de Bolgos turning to Valbourg.

"She's a marvel," was the answer, articulated in a tone of profound conviction. "She is a foreigner, I think you told me."

"Yes, she has just arrived from North America."

"Has she brought her husband with her?"

"She isn't married, and she is an orphan. She has crossed the Atlantic to see the old lady who is now acting as her chaperon and also to amuse herself a little, I fancy. American girls never behave like French ones, you know."

"Is that Countess de Serq a relative of hers?"

"A distant cousin, I believe, and it seems that she didn't at all expect to see the young Canadian—for the beauty hails from Quebec or Montreal. However, Madame de Serq would not have consented to take her into society if she had not been well informed as to her family and position. The old lady is very experienced, and her principles are very rigid. She would never think of patronising an adventuress; but as matters stand she is delighted to be able to chaperon an heiress of good birth. The countess is an inveterate match-maker."

"Well, she won't have any trouble in finding a husband for such a pretty girl as that. A fellow would marry her even if she were dowerless," said Valbourg fervently.

"No doubt; but she happens to be very well off. She has extensive landed property across the ocean, and she arrived here with a letter of credit on the Rothschilds, for a large amount. She is staying for the time being at one of the principal hotels on the Place Vendôme, but she has just taken a house in the Rue Galilée which is being furnished, and in a month's time she will give some entertainments which all Paris will talk about."

"You are remarkably well informed, I see," said Valbourg with a touch of apprehension in his tone of voice.

"Oh! my informant was a reporter whom I know very well: for the newspapers are already beginning to talk about her. But if you care to be introduced it will be an easy matter. Madame Mireille must know the Countess de Serq."

"I have not seen much of Madame Mireille this winter, unfortunately," said Valbourg. "She lives in a rather retired style, I believe. But I heard she had fixed a fresh day for her 'at homes' quite recently—Wednesday every week, that's it, I believe; and if you like, my dear count, we will go and call upon her together."

"Willingly. Madame Mireille is one of the most charming

women I have ever met, and I have reproached myself for having neglected her society of late. Do you know that if she ever tired of remaining a widow she would prove a capital match for a man of your age or mine. Besides her many personal qualities, she has a fortune of a couple of millions, I believe."

"Yes, at least," replied Valbourg, "and I have heard that her money is well invested."

"Then there is no fear of her losing it in a smash-up like that recent affair of the Union Générale Bank. Madame Mireille was more prudent than a good many capitalists of my acquaintance. But between us, my dear Valbourg, haven't you ever thought of asking her to marry you?"

"No, and for a very good reason. If she ever marries again, it will be for the sake of a title, I know that; she herself told me so; and as I am neither a count nor a baron, I didn't venture to come forward. But thinking of it, you told me just now that you wouldn't mind giving your name to a woman of the middle classes, so that if Madame Mireille be to your taste you might easily become her husband."

"If I thought that, I should have a try. And as for yourself, my dear fellow, would you ask for the hand of that Canadian beauty if you fancied you had a chance of being accepted?"

"Perhaps I should. Still, I should need to be introduced to her to begin with. However captivating a young girl may be, a man doesn't marry her without knowing something about her."

"Well the old Countess de Serq is almost a friend of mine. Shall we call upon her in her box after the first act?"

"Willingly. If only to take a closer look at that fair Canadian."

"Then it's agreed," said M. de Bolgos. "And by the way we can kill two birds with one stone; for just look, there is Madame Mireille coming into the next box."

The Galician magnate had spoken correctly. Madame Mireille had just made her entry into a box, adjoining the one occupied by the Countess de Serq and her young companion. The beautiful widow was standing up, and it could be seen that she was attired in black, with red bows on her dress-body, and diamond stars in her hair. She was gazing at the audience and seemed to take a delight in braving the fire of a hundred opera glasses.

Jacques Valbourg's heart began to beat fastly. He had not seen Fernande since their quarrel, and now he beheld her more beautiful and with a grander mien than ever. She had equipped herself in campaigning uniform and seemed to have come there to achieve conquests, perhaps to spite and deride her whilom lover, for she must have heard that he now went about everywhere, and have guessed that he would not miss that first performance at the Variétés. Valbourg felt enraged, and although he had lost Fernande solely by his own fault, for he might have married her had he chosen, he again swore to be revenged upon her.

And vengeance, double vengeance, was there under his thumb.

Chance had brought to the theatre both the titled scoundrel, who, he intended, should be Fernande's husband, and an adorable young girl who was twice as beautiful as she was. The mine was laid, it was now only a question of firing the powder, and Monsieur de Bolgos had just offered to light the match.

Madame Mireillo was alone, she had not even brought her lady-companion with her, as she usually did, and one might have suspected that she anticipated some visits during the various "waits" and wished to be fully at her ease. After a brief pause she advanced slowly to the edge of the box, and before sitting down she exchanged an almost friendly greeting with Madame de Serq.

"You see that they know each other," said Monsieur de Bolgos to Valbourg. "I knew that they must have met in society. The old countess does not remain cloistered in the Faubourg St. Germain. She goes about everywhere, even visiting bankers' widows—and besides she can hardly miss so good an opportunity of securing admission for her young charge into a very delightful drawing-room. Just look, she is introducing the Canadian beauty to Madame Mireille who is leaning forward to say a few gracious words—and the young girl replies by an equally gracious smile—Ah! my dear fellow, what teeth she has, they are real pearls! You see that Madame Mireille is seating herself close to the partition which separates the two boxes. The Canadian beauty evidently pleases her, and she doesn't fear comparison. In that respect she is quite right at least in my opinion, for they are not at all alike, and it is difficult to say which is the more charming of the two—a Titian beside a Raffaëllo—which do you prefer? As for myself I'm for the Venetian school."

"So much the better," rejoined Valbourg, "for the Venetian school is represented here by a woman who would suit you very well as a wife. But I confess that I prefer the Raffaëllo."

"That's capital. We sha'n't be going on one another's lines and we shall be able to help each other. You must assist me in getting into the good graces of Madame Mireille again; I have sadly neglected her of late. On the other hand, I am on good terms with Madame de Serq, and I even flatter myself that my opinion has some little weight with her; so I will talk to her about you in such a favourable strain that your candidature will be brought forward at the very first interview. We will attend to all that during the first "wait"; but just now, if you take my advice, it is best not to continue staring at them. If they see us watching them persistently they will suspect that we mean to attack them, and it's always best to take women by surprise. In the first place, the unforeseen has a peculiar charm for them, and, besides, they lose half their power of resistance when taken unawares."

"You are right," said Valbourg, and without more ado, he turned round towards the stage.

It was evident that the curtain would soon rise. The musicians were tuning their instruments, which gave vent to discov-

sounds, and the conductor was already rapping on his desk. The spectators had at length settled down and one only heard a confused buzzing noise.

"Who would ever think that we were on the morrow of a frightful financial crash?" said M. de Bolgos sententiously. "All the Bourse is here, all the young bankers. There are a score of men who have just lost vast amounts and yet, all the same, they will laugh heartily at the witty sallies of the actors."

"Oh! some of them will laugh the wrong side of their mouths," muttered Valbourg carelessly.

"Not you, I hope," rejoined the count with an air of interest. "You have escaped all right."

"Not without leaving something behind me. In fact, the crash will cost me a tidy amount as it is; and it might have cost me a very large one. You are aware that several brokers have almost failed, and I had left three hundred thousand francs with mine to be used in 'options.'

"Fortunately, he held tight," said M. de Bolgos; "but you must allow me to tell you, my dear friend, that you were very imprudent. No one can be considered safe in such times as these."

"No, indeed," rejoined Valbourg, whose meaning was beyond the count's comprehension.

"I suppose that you have at least received this money from your brokers?" resumed M. de Bolgos, in a friendly way.

"Why no; not yet. I am hesitating about buying some particular stock; and yet to tell the truth, there are moments when I ask myself whether it would not be better for me to shut my gold and bank-notes up in a cupboard, rather than purchase shares which may only be worth their weight in paper from one day to another."

"That's the Oriental system," said the count, smiling. "and I almost believe that it isn't a bad one. Money doesn't bring in interest when one keeps it locked up, but, at least, there is no risk of losing it."

"Unless it is stolen," observed Valbourg.

"Oh! in Paris when a man has a good safe provided with a combination lock, and strongly made, he can sleep at his ease."

"Well, I have a capital safe and yet I don't put any particular trust in it."

"What! has any one tried to force it open?" asked M. de Bolgos, stealthily glancing at his companion.

"No; only the papers are full of alarming stories. Thieves enter people's houses and ransack them at their ease. And talking of safes, why, last year, some fellows entered a respectable house and carried a safe off under the very eyes of the doorkeeper."

"Yes; I read an account of that affair, which was really amusing. But such things only happen in badly guarded houses and *you* haven't anything to fear from burglars."

Who knows? The doorkeeper is a fool who never pays any attention to anything. I live alone, I go out after breakfast and re-

turn home late—so that I shouldn't at all be astonished if I were robbed."

"But you have a valet, and he mounts guard properly, I hope ; for it was I who recommended him to you."

"Justin ! yes, I am pretty well satisfied with him. He waits on me as I like to be waited upon—that is discreetly and silently. Besides, I believe he is honest."

"Oh ! you may be sure of that. I had him in my service and you know that I am often very careless. It frequently happens that I leave money lying on my mantel-piece, and in his time I never noticed that a *louis* was missing, nor even a cigar ; although I have several boxes at the mercy of my servants. However, matters have not been the same since Justin left me."

"I have often wondered why he did leave you," observed Valbourg, who wished to extort as much information as possible from the count.

"Well, he didn't like the neighbourhood I live in. He must have a sweetheart somewhere in the central part of Paris, and he, no doubt, found the Rue Jean Gougon too far off, whereas, the Boulevard Malesherbes, where you live, suits him. Besides, he told me that he found himself very comfortable with you."

"You see him then ?" said Valbourg, feigning surprise.

"Well, I have met him two or three times, and as I had always been very well satisfied with him, I wanted to find out how he liked his new situation. He replied that he hoped he should remain with you all his life ; and indeed if you have no reason to complain of him, you had better keep him—good servants are scarce now-a-days, especially those who become attached to their masters—I fancy that Justin is attached to you."

"Perhaps so," said Valbourg, "and after all it would only be natural. I let him have a great deal of liberty. He goes out almost whenever he likes and he does not sleep in my rooms. However, I suppose that he doesn't misconduct himself during his leisure time, and as for sending him away, I haven't any intention of doing so."

"No, don't, my dear fellow," rejoined the count, warmly, "and if you take my advice you will recover possession of that money of yours lying at your broker's. The financial crisis isn't over by any means, and your funds will be safer with you than with anyone else. For my own part, I sold all my stock before the crash and I am hoarding my money up, pending a revival. However, I don't want to bother you with advice ; besides, it would be presuming on my part to do so. Ah ! there are the prompter's raps. Let us swallow the first act and after that we will go and pay our court to Madame Mireille and her charming neighbour."

The orchestra now began to play a noisy overture, and the strains of the trombones preventing any further conversation, the two friends settled down in their stalls. The curtain then went up, and the piece began as usual by a dialogue between two secondary actors.

The leading gentlemen and ladies like to make a sensational entry ; still, even had they already been upon the stage, Valbourg would not have paid any attention to them. He was staring blindly at the minor comedians, now gesticulating beyond the footlights, and he paid no heed to the wretched stuff they were reciting. His thoughts were with Madame Mireille and with Madame de Serq's fair cousin ; and if he had not feared attracting their attention, he would have again turned round to look at them. In default of that, he reflected as to how he should manœuvre during the "wait" when the proper moment for the attack arrived.

He asked himself whether he should first of all let himself be introduced by M. de Bolgos to Madame de Serq, or whether he should begin by calling upon Madame Mireille with the count. And he felt inclined to follow the latter course.

He also began to reflect avenir the conversation which he had just had with his companion. The latter's questions and advice left no doubt as to his intentions ; and his praise of Justin had proved that he still relied upon the valet as an accomplice. Therein was the danger—not of being robbed, for Valbourg had taken every precaution to guard against such a mishap as that—b' t Bolgos might discover that the valet was betraying him and hastily abscond from France so as to avoid the consequences of his subaltern's treason. This contingency was an annoying one, for Valbourg relied upon the unwitting help of the Galician grandee in wreaking vengeance upon Madame Mireille.

Jacques grew so absorbed in his reflections that he ended by leaning back in his stall, and gazing absently at the spectators in the upper boxes and galleries. These folks were not people calculated to interest him, and yet his eyes suddenly ceased wandering about as soon as they lighted upon a man who was standing in the rear, on the fourth tier.

This fellow looked very much like Justin, that is as far as Valbourg could judge at such a distance. He seemed to have the same figure and face, but this was not quite certain, as he wore his hat pulled down over his eyes. Spectators on the fourth tier do pretty well as they like, be it remembered, and retain or remove their head-gear according to their wont. However, this man seemed to be better dressed than his neighbours, who looked like programme or cheap-ticket vendors.

Now, Valbourg, after dressing prior to dining at his club, had given his valet leave until the following morning ; and thereto had been nothing to prevent Justin from going to the theatre to see a new piece. However, as a rule, the young fellow did not care to mingle with low-bred people, and, that being the case, it was strange that he should have climbed to the fourth tier.

"If it's he," thought Valbourg, "he hasn't gone and perched himself up there without a motive. Has he come here to play the spy upon me ? Is he playing a double game ? I must set my mind at rest upon that point this very evening, and I will try not to lose

sight of him during the performance. On going away, I shall soon see whether he follows me or not."

However, slightly below the fellow who looked so much like Justin, Valbourg suddenly recognised another person who was seated upon the same tier, leaning upon the hand rest, with several characters of more or less disreputable aspect beside him ; and his features were those of the loafer who had so impudently asked M. de Bolgos for a light on the boulevard. At this sight, all Valbourg's suspicions became intensified, and he came to the conclusion that it was not chance that had brought about this close proximity of two individuals—one of whom, the valet, had, at least, formed part of the Galician magnate's gang ; whilst the other, the rough, apparently still served in it.

"They understand each other. That's evident?" thought Jacques, "and they are there by their leader's orders. The deuce ! It is time for me to be on my guard. Still, even if I dismiss Justin, my plans will fail, for Bolgos will mistrust me. But no ; Justin cannot have told him about the scene in the gallery. If Bolgos were aware that I knew his secrets, he would have already left Paris. Justin must be carrying out the instructions which I gave him. He pretends to obey his ex-employer, who must have ordered him to come to this theatre this evening. Why ? That's what I can't guess ; however, I shall question Justin to-morrow morning, and he will have to give me a full explanation."

Valbourg had reached this point in his reflections when his eyes met Justin's ; and the latter, instead of retreating into the shade, at once raised his hat with his right hand, whilst with his left he pointed to the disreputable-looking fellow seated in front of him. The valet did not try to hide himself from his master, so that he was not betraying him ; and, besides, his gestures plainly implied ; "That scamp is one of your enemy's hirelings, but I have come here to watch him."

At this moment, M. de Bolgos, who did not seem to be particularly interested in what was transpiring upon the stage, also raised his eyes towards the galleries, and Justin at once became invisible. Had he hidden himself in some dark corner, or had he crouched down behind the last bench ? At all events, he did not show himself again.

"Ah !" thought Valbourg, who now felt re-assured, "he isn't working for Bolgos, but for me. And I begin to think that he will render me some signal services. It's only a question of treating him leniently without giving him his freedom."

At this moment, thunders of applause greeted the entry of the leading low comedian, and Valbourg decided to listen to the performance for a time, so as not to attract attention. A fat dramatic critic sat on his right hand and impeded his movements, so that he was hardly comfortable ; whilst in the rear a party of tourists from the provinces deafened him with their idiotic laughter. He sin-

corely wished that the first act were over, and turned anything but a smiling face upon the stage.

M. de Bolgos also felt bored, but he exerted his patience and contented himself with yawning, to the great irritation of his left-hand neighbour, who must have been either a friend of one of the authors, or else a passionate admirer of the expected diva.

She at last appeared, and then the audience seemed seized with delirium. A universal transport made everyone quiver with delight. The stalls became all eyes, and even the boxes on the first tier were roused from their apathy. Madame Mireille applauded with the tips of her gloved fingers, and the Countess de Serq jogged her head by way of expressing her approval. As for the fair Canadian, she contented herself with smiling and looking attentively at the whilom music-hall vocalist, whom the Parisians, with strange infatuation, have raised to the rank of a *prima donna*.

Valbourg looked round from time to time, and it chanced that he saw Fernande turn her glasses upon him—small, handsome glasses they were, which he had had expressly made for her, and which were calculated to remind him of his lost happiness. “She knows now that I am in the house,” he thought, “and if she stays it is a sign that she doesn’t fear an explanation. Wait a bit, I’ll show her by-and-bye that I have no fear of her. She is vain enough to imagine that I regret her; but I will prove to her that she’s mistaken, and that I don’t mean to be caught in her toils again. If Bolgos did not brag when he promised that I should have a good reception from Madame de Serq, Fernande’s punishment will begin this very evening. That Canadian girl is, at least, as pretty as she is, and she is much younger—a deal much younger, for she doesn’t seem to be more than twenty, whereas I am thirty-six, and a few months besides, but no one would think it. So, if Madame de Serq’s young charge has really come to France to find a husband, I may very well come forward as a suitor. She’ll have no lack of admirers, probably, but I shall have first rank, as she is only just coming out here; and I don’t see why I shouldn’t please her. I know how to tackle foreign beauties. Besides, I shall have time to make inquiries before taking the plunge, and I won’t fail to do so. I can’t accept the information of a fellow like Bolgos without controlling it.”

These and similar thoughts occupied Valbourg until the finish of the first act, of which he did not hear a single word. The curtain fell amid the clapping of a body of hired applauders, who were well paid and well disciplined for they only intervened on the proper occasions.

“That final scene was rather amusing,” now said M. de Bolgos, “and I fancy that this affair will be a success; still, I don’t know why it is, but every time that I go to the theatre it seems to me that I have already seen the piece. The actresses’ costumes are changed and the refrains of their songs as well—but that’s the only difference.”

"I so fully agree with you in that respect, that I don't at all care to see the piece out," retorted Valbourg. "Shall we now go and see Madame Mireille? After that we will consider whether we ought to swallow the remainder of this theatrical mixture."

"All right, let's go," said the count. "I shall be glad to make peace with an amiable woman who must have a grievance against me for not calling upon her; and I shall profit by the opportunity to pay my duty to her neighbours."

They had less trouble to leave the auditorium than they had had to enter it. Almost all the spectators experienced a need of retiring into the passages to exchange opinions, and to try to overhear what some prominent critic said about the piece. This would serve them as a guide for their own views, for the Parisians have lost the habit of judging for themselves, and the audience at a first performance is nothing more than a flock of sheep. On this occasion the critics having delivered a favourable verdict, everyone was of the same opinion. The first act was gay; the leading low comedian was a remarkably funny fellow; and as for the diva, Anna Judic, she was simply captivating, irresistible, perfect. The only folks who made grimaces were some rival play-wrights envious of the author's success, and some rival lessees whose own houses failed to "draw."

However, Valbourg and Bolgos did not tarry to listen to the hosannah of praise; they were bent upon reaching the first tier of boxes, but at the end of the passage they were abruptly accosted by a journalist whom they were acquainted with, a merry fellow, who found his way into all circles of society, and who was a kind of universal reporter—at once capable of interviewing the most exalted personages and wringing some interesting statement from them, of following some celebrated case in the law-courts and describing the scene to the entertainment of his readers; a past master in the act of dashing off an amusing article whenever regular "copy" fell short, always ready, always well informed, always provided with an abundant fund of witty anecdote; and knowing on the tips of his fingers everything that went on in the slips of the twenty theatres of Paris, as well as in the offices of the Prefecture of Police.

"Well, my dear Sornac," said the Count de Bolgos, "there will be a 'hundredth night,' won't there? These things no longer amuse *me*, but whichever way I turn I only see delighted faces."

"Oh! it's all the same to me," said Sornac. "I didn't come here for the piece."

"For the ladies, then? You have no doubt got to jot down the names of all the pretty women in the house. Well, the list won't be a long one. There are not more than ten worth mentioning."

"Oh! I don't care a rap for the pretty women this evening. But some detectives have been on the look-out, during the last fortnight, for a gang of fellows who 'work' when the spectators come out of the theatres. When I say on the look-out, the fact is, they don't even know by sight a single one of the fellows whom they

want to catch. All they are aware of is, that these scamps 'work' in a special manner, and they hope to catch them in the act—"

"Of stealing opera-glasses or overcoats?"

"Oh! if it were only that, the whole brigade wouldn't be out on duty. But don't you know that every evening people who go home late are attacked?"

"Why, no. I don't read the police news. It's a mistake on my part, no doubt."

"Oh! come, you must have heard that a young fellow belonging to your club was plundered at the corner of the Rue de Berry only last week."

"Little Nancras, who calls himself a viscount? That's the fellow you mean, eh? Well, of course I heard of that. He shouted his adventure from the housetops, as it were, and pretended that he had been robbed of twenty-two thousand francs which he had about him. He even profited by the circumstance not to settle his differences at the Bourse. But the story was an improbable one and nobody ever really believed it."

"It was a mistake not to believe it; and besides, there have been other cases. Gentlemen who haven't complained for fear of injuring their credit have been despoiled of large sums which they had won at cards—despoiled by bandits who waylaid them on their road home, and who were remarkably well informed, as they never ventured to attack anyone who had lost his money."

"What! are your bandits members of our clubs, then? Come, Sornac, my dear fellow, you have too much imagination."

"I am not inventing anything, my dear count, I assure you. My information comes from very high and powerful personages who are bent upon putting a stop to this sort of thing. It is supposed that these fellows have confederates who belong to various clubs, and a leader who points out all the good hauls that are to be made. In fact, the Prefect of Police was warned that the leader of the gang would be at the Variétés this very evening."

"Oh come! this is really too strong, my dear fellow," said M. de Bolgos with a sneer; "what! the Variétés shelters the leader of a band of brigands? Where is he? I would give ten louis to catch a glimpse of him."

"Well, I can't undertake to point him out to you," replied Sornac. "But pray believe that I am speaking seriously. If he is detected I shall at least know of it at once, and it is in hope of that that I have come here this evening. I am doing my work conscientiously, and I don't want to miss such a fine opportunity of providing my paper with a special item of news—sensational and yet truthful news—which none of our contemporaries will have."

"Well, I have no paper," replied M. de Bolgos. "Still I shouldn't be sorry if I could see this person collared. It will be a very curious sight."

"Oh! no one will be collared. This is the course which the detectives mean to follow—but first of all I must tell you that the

officials at the prefecture have received a description of this gentleman's person—”

“ What ! is the fellow a gentleman, then ? ”

“ Yes, and a very stylish one, so it appears, though the scamps he commands are quite the reverse. If he has gathered them together here, as his anonymous denoucer asserts, it is apparently in view of pointing some one out to them—some one whom they are to follow after the performance and attack at the corner of a deserted street. So some detectives have been placed in the house with orders to watch all suspicious gatherings and conversation.”

“ The deuce ! why here we form a gathering ourselves,” said M. de Bolgos scornfully ; “ we had better disperse, my dear fellow.”

“ You are jesting, but if an elegantly dressed gentleman like yourself were seen talking with any shabby fellows—”

“ They would all be arrested ? ”

“ Oh, no ! they would be watched, and when they left they would be followed. If the detectives are sharp they may capture the bandits in the very act of attacking some one, and also find out the address of this leader of theirs who never takes an active part in the expeditions.”

“ In that case, we sha'n't see anything. It's a great pity, I was looking forward to the capture of this Fra Diavolo. But, no matter, I thank you for the information. I shall take my precautions, and my friend Valbourg will do the same. He won't go home on foot after midnight. That's the very advice which I gave him a little while ago. And now may I give you a little advice in your turn, my dear Sornac ? ”

“ Certainly, you may.”

“ Very well, then ; I advise you not to noise this story about. You might tell it to this very same bandit-chief who disguises himself as a gentleman ; and then the scheme of the police authorities would fall through ; for, forewarned, you know, means forearmed. Besides, your friends at the prefecture might guess that it was you who had let the cat out of the bag, and then they would never tell you anything again. That would be a sad misfortune for a reporter who aims at knowing everything.”

“ You are very merry, my dear count, I must say, and that idea of yours is really a funny one. But I know you, and I rely upon your discretion. If the news I have just confided to you reached the ears of any fellow-pressman he would rob me of it, without any scruple.”

“ Be easy on that point, my dear fellow. You are the only journalist that I and Valbourg know, and we won't betray you. Still I hope you will keep us duly posted. 'To be continued in the next number' that's the style, isn't it ? ”

“ On the next occasion we meet, it's agreed. But not a word to anyone at your club.”

“ Hum ! it would be charitable to warn our fellow-members, for play runs high at our place, and if by any chance your fashionable

brigand were a member, the winners might have the same fate as little Nancras. However, their safety isn't in our keeping. So much the worse for the lucky fellows who won't go to the expense of taking a cab. We will be as mute as fishes. Till we meet again, my dear informant."

"Till we meet again," replied Sornac, and thereupon he hurried away.

"What a singular fellow!" exclaimed M. de Bolgos, now turning to Valbourg. "The secret is in nice hands. That tattler will noise it about everywhere so as to give himself some little importance. The police certainly confide in very untrustworthy people—unless indeed they were merely making fun of him when they told him this story. For my own part, I can hardly believe that passers-by are stopped in the streets of Paris just as coaches used to be stopped on the outskirts of the forest of Bondy."

"And yet it is certain that Nancras—"

"Pooh! that spurious viscount is quite capable of having invented that adventure of his. It was a good excuse for not paying his gambling debts within the usual limit of time. Still prudence begets safety, you know; and so do as I do; always go home in a cab."

Valbourg did not insist on the point. He now knew what to think about the existence of this band and its leader. Justin had evidently spoken the truth, and his master even suspected that it was he who had sent the anonymous denunciation to the police. So his conversion was a real one and he was endeavouring to foil M. de Bolgos's schemes. But on the other hand he unwittingly displayed too much zeal. "He thinks he is serving my interests," thought Valbourg, "and extricating himself from a dangerous position by putting a stop to the exploits of this titled scoundrel. He doesn't know my plans, and he isn't aware that he is working too fast for me. I want to have the count arrested when he has become Fernande's husband, not beforehand. If he were captured this evening I should be the person to suffer, and I am glad that Sornac's chatter has put him on his guard. I shall have an explanation with Justin to-morrow morning and I will quiet his ardour a bit."

"How are we going to proceed?" asked M. de Bolgos when they had reached the first tier. "If you prefer to enter Madame Mireille's box alone, I will go and call on Madame de Serq and join you afterwards."

"Why should we separate?" responded Valbourg, "haven't we promised one another mutual assistance? Let us begin with Madame Mireille and after that we will see."

"All right, my dear fellow. I will conform myself to your programme. It is now only a question of finding the right box."

"It is the central one, the best in the whole theatre. I know it and will show you the way."

There was the usual palaver with the box-opener, but Valbourg curtailed it by offering some silver to the woman, who thereupon opened Madame Mireille's box.

Fernande greeted them as though she had been expecting them, indeed, as though she had seen them only the day before. She neither blushed nor did she turn pale ; her face remained quite calm and smiling.

"Ah ! so here you are at last," she said in the gayest possible manner ; "I espied you seated side by side in the stalls, and I asked myself whether you would be cruel enough to leave me alone in this large box where I look like some deserted woman. Now that I have you, I mean to keep you. The audience shall see that I still have *some friends left*."

"Did you doubt it, madame ?" quickly asked the Count de Bolgos.

"Well, yes, I did, and I am very angry with both of you. You used to be faithful visitors of mine, and now you have deserted my house ; you especially, count. Whole months have elapsed since you last set foot in my drawing-room. Monsieur Valbourg has been a little more polite ; he called occasionally during the past winter ; still, lately he has not come at all. You see what bad examples lead to."

"I swear to you, madame," began the count, "that if I had been aware that I had displeased you—".

"Don't swear anything. Simply confess that you amuse yourself much better at your club than in my house. Cards and cigars have a wonderful charm ! All the same, I intend to deprive you of all pretexts. I have decided to resume my Wednesday receptions, and there will be as much play and as much smoking as you like, providing you only condescend to accept my invitations."

In response, M. de Bolgos declared that all the gambling at the club and all the cigars of the Havannah were not to be compared with an evening spent with an amiable lady, and that he should be only too happy to avail himself of the invitation without requiring any concession to masculine tastes and habits.

Valbourg spoke in a similar strain, but less warmly. Fernande's self-possession vexed and humiliated him. He was obliged to admit that she had stronger nerves than he had, for he felt ill at ease, whereas she was perfectly calm. And yet he realised that he ought to congratulate himself on the turn that affairs were taking. She played her part so well that the shrewdest man would have been deceived, and M. de Bolgos could not possibly imagine that he was witnessing the first interview of two lovers after a quarrel of three weeks' duration.

"What ! are you still standing ?" resumed Madame Mireille. "I presume that you don't intend to go off without sitting down. I sha'n't content myself with a formal visit ; and if you withdraw I myself shall leave the theatre. The piece is rather amusing, but I don't feel inclined to listen to it in solitude. I should greatly prefer a chat."

"And so should we !" exclaimed M. de Bolgos. "I was saying to Valbourg only just now that we are no longer in the swing—

theatricals used to amuse us once upon a time but now they only bore us. And the stalls here are perfect instruments of torture—so you may judge with what delight we accept the seats you offer us in your comfortable box. Only I must ask your permission to go and pay my respects to Madame de Serq—”

“What! do you know her? For my own part, I am not sufficiently acquainted with her to be neighbourly here; but you might make matters easier. I am longing to have a chat with that charming young person who is with her, but it wouldn’t be proper to start a conversation across the partition which separates us. Suppose you break the ice for us; I should be very grateful to you if you would do so.”

“Then you will allow me to return?” asked the count.

“I beg that you will do so,” replied Fernande, “and indeed—if those ladies did not object we might make up a single party. There are six seats in each box and there are only five of us in all—including you, gentlemen, for I hope that you will not desert us until the performance is over.”

“I will do my best to ensure the acceptance of your proposal, madame,” said M. de Bolgos, “it would be delightful—but I must profit by this opportunity to speak to Madame de Serq, for, as her young relative is a foreigner and has but recently arrived in Paris, she no doubt wishes to hear the actors; and I don’t want to interfere with her amusement.”

“Then go at once, and arrange matters before the curtain rises again, my dear ambassador.”

After pressing the pretty hand which was offered him, M. de Bolgos left the box, and Fernande remained for a time alone with the man whom she had loved so well. A spell of silence followed. The two adversaries scrutinized one another before opening hostilities; however, the suspense was of short duration. Valbourg soon recovered from his emotion, and Fernande did not need to regain her self-possession, as her calmness had not for one moment deserted her.

“I am glad to see that you don’t sulk,” she said gaily. “I was afraid you might do so.”

“Sulk?” replied Valbourg, “what would be the good of that? I know how to suffer without complaining.”

“What! are you still suffering?” asked Madame Mireille with a smile.

“Would you believe me, if I answered ‘no’?”

“Certainly I should; for I, also, suffered for a time but now I am quite cured, and if you take my advice we will make peace.”

“I was just about to propose that.”

“No, no, I offer it, for I was the offended party. Oh! I don’t say that in view of raking up the past—I have forgotten everything. I shall always be pleased to see you as a friend—though I don’t know whether you will appreciate the charm of friendship. As for myself it seems to me delightful.”

"I trust that it will be the same with me," said Valbourg. "It is merely a habit to acquire."

"I will assist you in that respect. I will set you the example, and you will soon see that friendship is a vast deal preferable to love. It is like a calm after a tempest."

"Then you seriously believe that people of the opposite sexes can live in close intimacy and content themselves with being friends?"

"Yes, of course I do; and what is more I mean to prove it."

"And so you have renounced love for good?"

"Yes, I have—I don't mean that I shall never marry again, for I cannot remain a widow for ever, it is too dreary; but you will certainly have been the only possessor of my heart. And I trust that on your side you also will marry. I am not jealous, for I know very well that no woman will efface from your heart or from mine the memory of past times, which we shall remember but not regret when we have learnt how to appreciate more peaceful and more durable delights."

"You talk so well that you will end by converting me to your ideas. I already begin to feel interested in your marriage—with someone else than myself," said Valbourg.

"Just as I shall take an interest in yours, providing you follow the straight path. When the proper time comes I shall be quite disposed to follow your advice in the same way as I trust that you will follow mine, for there is nothing I desire so much as to see you happy. In the meanwhile, as all the clouds are now dispelled, perhaps you will tell me what you have been doing with yourself since I saw you last?"

"Well, I have been trying to amuse myself."

"And no doubt you have succeeded, since I find you here at this first performance. You had almost given up going to the theatre."

"Yes, I had lost the habit of doing so, and I have some little trouble in acquiring it again. However, I go a great deal to the club, and I dined there this evening with M. de Bolgos, who persuaded me to come to the *Variétés*."

"Then I owe him my best thanks. He's a very nice fellow, and you did right to bring him to see me here. For some time past I have seen very little of him, and, in fact, he kept so persistently in the background that I sometimes asked myself whether he had not guessed the truth as regards you and me."

"Oh! I'm sure of the contrary."

"But he is a very experienced man and naturally shrewd; at least, so it seems to me."

"Less shrewd than you fancy. Although he has seen a good deal of the world he has retained a great many illusions and plenty of feeling. His heart has remained young, as it were, and he would still give way to its promptings. That seldom happens among men of his age and position. He is thirty-eight, a count of undoubted lineage, connected with all the greatest Polish families; and on

reaching his majority he came into possession of a large fortune, which he has increased rather than diminished."

"So many motives for being *blase'*," interrupted Madame Mireille.

"Well, as for that, he is less *blase'* than I am. He was telling me only just now that his great regret was that he had never been loved by a woman worthy of him ; and that his dearest wish would be to marry someone who would care for him and whom he could care for. He does not wish for either money or birth. He has enough of each for both. He desires personal attractions and qualities, and if any woman really pleased him he would marry her without the slightest hesitation."

"I'm astonished to hear that," said Fernande, "I thought that his ideas were very different."

"Well, just turn the conversation on the subject, and you will soon see that I have told you the truth."

"Oh ! I sha'n't do that," replied Madame Mireille, with a laugh. "He would fancy that I was fishing for him as a husband."

"You might do worse," muttered Valbourg.

"Is this a piece of advice on your part ?" inquired Fernande, looking steadily at her whilom lover.

Valbourg guessed her thoughts, and so he drily answered : "No. I trust that you will be happy when you marry, but I have no intention of helping you to find a husband—at all events, I certainly should never try to bring about a match between you and one of my friends."

A flash darted from Madame Mireille's eyes and Valbourg again divined her thoughts. She had momentarily suspected that his remarks concealed some snare, but his last reply had reassured her, and she was now saying to herself : "I know where I must strike to pierce his very heart. He would die of rage if I became the Countess de Bolgos. And why shouldn't I ? That Galician nobleman is a handsome fellow ; he is rich, richer than I am, I fear, still I am well worth him, and I have a good game to play, since he shows himself so affable after remaining in the background for such a long while. It is only a question of pleasing him and I will try to do so."

"I was sure that you would answer me like that," she finally said aloud, "and I am of your opinion that one ought not to carry abnegation too far. So I sha'n't suggest your marrying one of my friends—and besides, I don't know any eligible young ladies. Still, I shouldn't mind giving you a little sound advice if I saw you inclined to marry anyone really beneath your notice."

"Oh ! I have no intention of marrying anyone beneath me," replied Jacques. "I know that appearances are often deceptive and I don't rely upon them. Only just now Bolgos was singing the praises of that young foreigner whom Madame de Serq is showing about. She is certainly charming, and yet, I should not be so foolish as to ask for her hand without first of all obtaining full information as to her parentage and position."

"You would act rightly in doing that," rejoined Madame Mireille, "for nothing from America can ever be trusted. But your remark opens up a prospect which I had not thought of. That young girl *would* suit you very well, providing that what people say about her is correct. It is stated that she belongs to an honourable family and that she has a great deal of money. The pecuniary question ought to be inquired into; but it is evident that Madame de Serq would not chaperon any one whose antecedents were not irreproachable. I should very much like to become acquainted with that young girl, and you are aware of it, for you heard me request Monsieur de Bolgos to bring us together. If Madame de Serq is willing, as I hope, you will have an opportunity of studying her young charge's attainments and disposition this very evening. And after that if you condescend to consult me, I shall frankly give you my opinion about her. I don't mind going as far as that, and you may rely on me to detect her failings if she has any. We women notice many things which escape the observation of men."

Valbourg bowed by way of assent, but he made no rejoinder. He was becoming absorbed in reflections which did not make him desirous of prolonging the conversation. He asked himself if Fernande were really sincere, when she pretended that she had forgiven him, and when she offered to assist him in securing another woman as his wife? However, he had no reason for disbelieving her. He could not imagine that she had had the very same idea as himself, and that she hoped to revenge herself upon him by inducing him to marry a woman unworthy of him. Still, he was not without some slight mistrust, and he instinctively remained on the defensive. Perhaps, also, he regretted the present situation, and reflected that he alone had brought it about. Why had he refused to marry this woman who had loved him so well? He had perhaps made a mistake in refusing; but as this thought began to rise in his mind, his pride forced it back, and he said to himself, that he was not a man to be ordered to marry just as a servant is ordered to lay the cloth!

This conversation with Fernande had been carried on in that low key adopted by women when chatting in a drawing-room behind the cover of their fans. Besides, the general buzz rising from the pit and the stalls, and the noise of the people walking to and fro, was favourable to the exchange of quiet "asides" in the boxes; and Madame Mireille's neighbours could not hear what was going on in her box any more than she and Valbourg could hear what was being said by M. de Bolgos, Madame de Serq and the latter's young relative.

The count was not long absent upon his embassy, and as soon as he returned Madame Mireille inquired: "Well, have you succeeded? Does Madame de Serq consent to the arrangement I proposed?"

"She does not merely consent, she is anxious for it," replied M. de Bolgos. "Her young cousin, it seems, had the same idea as you, and when I entered their box she was trying to prevail upon the

countess to act in a neighbourly manner. However, Madame de Serq feared that she might disturb you, but I set her mind at ease on that point ; and she then requested me to apprise you of her coming visit."

"No, no, I will call on *her*, and there's no time to be lost, for the 'wait' will soon be over," said Fernande hastily.

"It is over. See, the spectators are returning to their seats, and the conductor is brandishing his baton."

"All the more reason to make haste then," said Fernande, rising up.

Valbourg was already on his feet. M. de Bolgos opened the door, and Madame Mireille passed out the first, anxious not to miss the meeting which she had so carefully prepared.

Marguerite was on her side. Marguerite, duly "schooled" by Madame de Sounans and weary of the life she had been leading, had consented to play a part ; and she played it admirably, and no doubt found it to her taste.

Everything had transpired as the astute baroness had foreseen. Madame de Serq had received her young relative from Canada with open arms, and was now chaperoning her with remarkable assiduity. She had even asked her to come and live with her, but Mademoiselle de Cambremer, with a native spirit of independence, had preferred to settle himself in accordance with her tastes. Her fortune allowed her to indulge in this fancy, which the countess had not opposed, as she knew very well that a little eccentricity on the part of a wealthy foreigner was never taken amiss in Paris. Margot, little Margot of the Rue du Rocher, had thus obtained full freedom without forfeiting the protective friendship of a woman who held a high position in the best society.

She had now reached the main point in the programme drawn up by Madame de Sounans, the moment when she was to enter into relations with Madame Mireille, without letting anyone, not even Madame de Serq, imagine that she was already acquainted with the rich widow. As for the meeting at the Variétés, that scheme had been initiated by Fernande. The idea had occurred to her to take two boxes side by side, and having sent Marguerite one ticket she had kept the other. Fernande had felt sure that the countess would not refuse to escort her young cousin to the theatre ; and she had also surmised that Jacques, attracted by the first performance, would likewise repair to the Variétés that evening.

The success surpassed her hopes. Madame de Serq had returned her bow, at the outset, in the most cordial manner. Valbourg had just signed at least a nominal peace, and he seemed to be sensible to Mademoiselle de Cambremer's charms. It was now only a question of turning all these favourable circumstances to account, and Madame Mireille considered that she possessed sufficient skill to start the intrigue of which the baroness had sketched the main lines.

As she left her box she was agreeably surprised to find Madame

de Serq and Marguerite at the door. They had left their own seats to visit her, and their alacrity seemed to augur well. This meeting on mutual ground, moreover, enabled Fernande to curtail the usual preambles, and to introduce Valbourg as though he were merely there by chance. Going straight up to the countess she exclaimed : " Will you forgive me for being so indiscreet ? I have so seldom had the pleasure of meeting you this winter that I did not like to miss this opportunity of spending a few minutes in your society. The partition which separated us seemed to me very annoying, and we could not meet unless we entered one or the other's box. However, I did not wish to disturb you."

" Oh ! pray don't apologise, my dear madame," replied the Countess de Serq, who was a most cordial old lady. " My relative, Marguerite de Cambremer, who is with me, was longing to be properly introduced to you, and if I had not fallen in with her wishes, I really believe that she would have called upon you alone. You seem to have inspired her with sympathy at first sight."

" The feeling is reciprocal," replied Fernande, " and I should have been sorry to spend the whole evening so near to Mademoiselle, without being able to tell her how happy I should be to become better acquainted with her. Will it suit you if we enter your box, and will you allow me to bring with me one of my friends, Monsieur Jacques Valbourg ? "

" Your friends are mine, dear madame," replied the countess, " my box is large enough for us all, and we shall be able to chat there."

" To chat ? " said M. de Bolgos. " You are in error, madame. The second act has just begun, and we should be reduced to talking in whispers, under penalty of hearing all the other spectators cry, ' hush ! ' It would be the same in Madame Mireille's box, and I don't see what course you could follow unless you were willing to enter the public lounge, which the audience has deserted since the curtain has gone up."

" The proposal would suit me admirably, my dear count, for I am not fond of the heat, and it is positively stifling in the house ; but Marguerite, who has come from abroad, is anxious to see the piece."

" I ! " exclaimed the young girl. " You are mistaken. I only care for music, and what we have heard so far has not seemed to me worth listening to."

" That is my opinion as well," retorted Madame Mireille, " and as Mademoiselle is not opposed to it, suppose we go and breathe a little in the lounge. These gentlemen will escort us there."

M. de Bolgos at once offered his arm to the young widow, and Madame de Serq willingly accepted Valbourg's. Mademoiselle de Cambremer thus remained without an escort, but she knew very well how to walk unassisted, and she naturally placed herself on the countess's left hand to ascend the steps.

Fernande admired the young girl's easy deportment, and heartily

congratulated herself on the choice she had made. Evidently enough, Margot came of a good stock, for the manners of polished society are not to be learnt like history or geography. They come to one almost on birth, and Margot behaved as though she had moved in aristocratic circles all her life. The trials through which she had passed had not tampered with her disposition, or lowered her pride ; and the shrewdest connoisseur would never have suspected that she had been living for a whole year in some shabby furnished apartments, worthy only of a *grisette*.

She had never looked more captivating, and Valbourg, fairly dazzled, felt prompted to express his admiration to the countess. "Yes," she replied, "flowers of that kind don't sprout in France, they need the virgin soil of free America. However, they are easily transplanted, and Margot will soon become acclimated in Paris. She came here once before."

"All those who see her must hope that she will now decide to remain among us," responded Fernande's whilom lover.

"For my own part, I hope she will ; for I love her as well as though she were my own daughter, and I shall endeavour to find a husband for her."

"That won't be difficult."

"More difficult than you imagine, my dear sir. Marguerite listens to my advice, but she only obeys the promptings of her own mind."

The young girl had not lost a word of these remarks, and she now gaily exclaimed, "I assure you, sir, that my cousin is slandering me. I always obey those I love."

"Then you scarcely love me, my dear," rejoined Madame de Serq, laughing. "For you would not consent to come and live with me. I scolded as much as I could, but you preferred to stay at a hotel, and I had to let you do so."

"The Rue Saint Dominique where you live is so dreary, cousin."

"Hardly as dreary as your Canadian wilds. However, I am good-natured, and we sha'n't quarrel over such a trifling matter. I really can't take up my abode with you on the Place Vendôme ; but I feel quite capable of superintending your definitive arrangements. Do you know, sir, this dear child has taken a house in the Rue Galilée, and she intends to give some fêtes there ? I should like to know how she would manage if I were not there to preside in her drawing-room."

"Oh ! you shall preside in it," replied Marguerite.

"And the invitations, Mademoiselle ? whom would you invite if I did not attend to the matter ? You would be reduced to picking names out of the Directory."

"Your friends will suffice for me," answered the young girl.

"It is true that I have a good many, and all of them are people of standing," rejoined the countess. "But they wouldn't go to see you if you were not under my patronage. Now, here is Monsieur

Valbourg, whom I meet in the best society. Ask him what he thinks of the foreigners, who open their doors to all comers."

"Well, madame," said Valbourg, "I think that if Mademoiselle de Cambremer thought fit to invite all those whom her wit, grace, and beauty will charm, she would soon have to close her doors to prevent too great a crush."

"That is too much flattery, sir," replied Marguerite, "you will make me doubt your sincerity. I willingly believe that I am neither ugly nor bad tempered, but you cannot know anything about my wit, for I have not yet said anything of any consequence."

"Oh ! you cunning minx !" exclaimed Madame de Serq. "You complain of flattery, and yet you speak in such a way as to provoke additional compliments. How many more do you want, mademoiselle ? Monsieur de Bolgos will pay you some, and Madame Mireille as well. You have captivated everybody."

The count and Fernande could hear very well what was being said behind them, and they at once came to Marguerite's assistance.

"Mademoiselle de Cambremer is right," said Bolgos. "She has not spoken much as yet, but silence is golden, and I am very grateful to her for not imitating certain American beauties of my acquaintance, who chatter like the parrots of the West Indies."

"Well, I complain," added Madame Mireille. "These gentlemen haven't yet given me time to tell Mademoiselle Marguerite what a high opinion I have formed of her ; but we are reaching the lounge, and we will have a general chat."

"Let us breathe a bit first of all," said the countess, who always felt too warm. "We can go on to the balcony and enjoy the fresh air, just as if we were in the Champs Elysées."

"And we shall be able to see the people passing along the boulevard," added Mademoiselle de Cambremer. "That's my delight ! I don't know anyone but you in Paris, and yet it always seems to me that I shall espouse some friendly face in the crowd."

All Parisians are acquainted with the gallery, decked with mirrors and furnished with some faded settees, which constitutes the public lounge at the Variétés. In the centre there is a buffet which does not do much of a trade, and at the farther end two glass doors admit of access to a kind of balcony overlooking the Boulevards Montmartre. This is a cosy spot to enjoy a spring evening, and smoke a cigarette in defiance of police regulations. In fine weather it is crowded and standing-room can scarcely be obtained there ; but in the month of February and on the occasion of a first performance, the spectators remain in the auditorium as long as the curtain is up, and mainly patronise the passages during the "waits."

Now, the curtain had just been raised, the lounge was deserted, and the exceptional mildness of the weather allowed spectators, not interested in the piece, to stroll about the balcony or lean

upon the balustrade and chat. Marguerite and her companions therefore took possession of the abandoned spot, and settled themselves there, far more commodiously than would have been practicable in a box, where all the seats are close together, and where "asides" become impossibilities. Here on the balcony twenty feet above the asphalt, they were free to move about and to indulge in general conversation or in private chats.

This suited Fernande admirably, for she wished to retain full freedom of action that evening. She wished to favour Marguerite's conversation with Valbourg without losing sight of them, to win the good graces of the countess beyond recall, and also to have a few moments' private chat with Monsieur de Bolgos, whom she found very much to her liking. All this could not be effected without moving about. The most skilful strategist, be it remembered, requires proper space for his manœuvres.

The other members of the party also appreciated the advantage of chatting on the balcony. Valbourg, who was biting at the bait prepared for him by Fernande, asked nothing better than to monopolize Mademoiselle de Cambremer; Bolgos was by no means sorry to pay his court to the rich and pretty widow who had received him so graciously; and Marguerite was delighted to be able to gaze at the stir on the boulevard and to listen to some compliments—for she had spent a dreary year of seclusion in the Rue du Rocher, where the passers-by were few and far between, and where the only conversation she had heard had been that of the Baroness de Soumans expounding her pet theories upon the art of winning at roulette.

Madame de Serq, on her side, was delighted to preside over this little gathering, and especially to breathe the fresh air, for she was afflicted with great corpulence, which invariably incommoded her, either at the theatre or at a party. She now took up her position on the balcony, between two columns, and the couples, whom she thus separated, by no means complained of this arrangement. Valbourg and Marguerite were on her left, and Fernande and Bolgos on her right. The countess served as a hyphen, as it were, and did not disturb any one, as she merely made a remark now and then, a remark directed either to her left or to her right and not requiring any long answer. Moreover her observations gave her neighbours a pretext for exchanging some interesting remarks among themselves.

"Would you believe it, my dear madame," she said to Fernande, "my little cousin won't avail herself of my carriage when we go out together? She pretends that my old calash is no longer fashionable, and so we came here in a livery-stable brougham driven by a coachman whom I never saw before. Heaven only knows how we shall find him when we go away."

"Oh! I shall recognise him," said Mademoiselle de Cambremer, "I never forget a face that I have once seen."

"Not even when it's a servant's?" asked Valbourg with a smile.

"No, not even a servant's face. I take an interest in all whom I have anything to do with, and one of my great worries on leaving Canada was that I had to part with some old servants who had known me since my birth. They were afraid of the voyage, however, and I could not prevail upon them to embark with me."

"What! did you make such a long voyage alone, mademoiselle? Did you cross the Atlantic—"

"Alone, without an escort or even a maid. Yes, I did; and I did not once feel embarrassed. I learnt how to wait upon myself when I was very young; and since I had the misfortune to lose my mother I have relied upon myself alone. I was brought up in that way, you see, and I prize my independence. Should I ever tire of it I shall marry."

"But you would not lose your freedom by marrying," rejoined Valbourg. "The contrary is the case in France, where young girls marry to become free."

"Well, for my own part I shall merely marry to love the man I choose. And as I shall love him it will be pleasant for me to have him as my master."

"I am sure that he will be only too happy to obey you," said Valbourg.

Marguerite guessed the import of these words, but she did not lower her eyes. She even gazed with singular persistency at the stalwart cavalier who had just been introduced to her, and who began with an indirect but perfectly transparent declaration. The Baroness de Soumans had taken good care not to mention Monsieur Jacques Valbourg to her; Margot would have refused Madame Mireille's generous offers had she known what was expected of her. However, she wished to win a husband, a husband to her liking, and Valbourg to all appearance was desirous of coming forward as a suitor. She therefore scrutinised him closely, and the result of her scrutiny was favourable to his hopes. Valbourg was by no means displeasing to her, nor for the matter of that, was Monsieur de Bolgos; and Madame Mireille, who was anxious to have the situation clearly defined, was at that very moment saying at the other end of the balcony: "I am glad, count, that our acquaintance has been renewed, for I hope I shall frequently see Mademoiselle de Cambremer at my house. You will meet her there, and I am of opinion that she would suit you perfectly."

"How do you imply that?" asked Bolgos with a smile.

"There are not two ways of putting it. That young girl is of good birth, she is very rich and she is remarkably beautiful. Why shouldn't you marry her?"

"For several reasons; and in the first place because she is too young."

"Is that a failing, then?" asked Fernande.

"Yes, it is in my eyes. I have no taste for young girls who know nothing of life; and moreover she is not French."

"Why, what can that matter to you? you are not French either."

"But don't you understand, madame, that I can only marry a woman of my own strength, a woman acquainted with life and able to appreciate me at my worth—a Parisienne, to say the word. I left my country fifteen years ago, I have moved in society in all the great capitals of Europe, and my desire is to reside permanently in France. Nothing certainly prevents me from remaining there, situated as I now am; but a deception might disgust me of the life I lead, a whim might carry me elsewhere. To place myself beyond any such chances which an old bachelor ought always to foresee, I need to be bound here by some serious tie."

"And you would allow yourself to be bound?" asked Fernande, shaking her head as if doubting what the count told her.

"To you, yes," replied M. de Bolgos, in a whisper.

The proposal was so plain and so unforeseen that Madame Mireille thought it best to turn it into a joke. "If I meddled in binding people," she said, gaily, "I should require guarantees. I only believe in perpetual vows, and I suspect you prefer temporary engagements."

"What must I do to prove to you that you judge me very wrongly?" asked the count. "Would you believe in the sincerity of my feelings if to-morrow afternoon I called on Madame de Serq and begged of her to make a formal request for your hand, on my behalf?"

Fernande did not know what to answer to this. She felt very flattered and the count's eagerness served her plans; but for the nonce she was unwilling to engage in a matrimonial conversation which seemed to her altogether too premature. Fortunately, Madame de Serq freed her from embarrassment, by suddenly exclaiming—"Ah, good heavens! there are some men quarrelling, and they will fight if they are not prevented. Look! there, on the side walk, just below us."

Fernande, who was delighted with this diversion, which dispensed her of the necessity of replying, leant over the balcony as if she took a pleasure in beholding the vulgar spectacle of a street row. A throng had gathered round a tall fellow whose bearded face was half concealed by a broad-brimmed hat of eccentric shape. This person was engaged in a dispute with two ill-clad rascals who had, no doubt, just insulted him or shoved against him; and, after ridding himself of one of them with a vigorous blow of his fist, he was holding the other by the throat. The crowd seemed disposed to take the side of the vanquished roughs; but the conqueror, so far, kept the bystanders in respect by merely looking at them.

This scene scarcely interested Madame Mireille; and it had no interest at all for Bolgos or Valbourg. But, judging by appearances, it preoccupied Mademoiselle de Cambremer, who was attentively watching every movement made by the man with the broad-brimmed hat. At one moment he happened to raise his head and then the

young girl perceptibly started. However, a party of police agents soon appeared upon the scene, which came to an abrupt finish as, after a little resistance, the representatives of the law walked all the three of the antagonists away.

"What is the matter with you, mademoiselle?" now asked Valbourg, "you seem disturbed—I can understand that—the tumult, the shouts, the threatening gestures—but be easy, no blood will be spilt."

"No, it isn't that," murmured Marguerite, "but I fear that I have caught cold, and I don't care to remain any longer on this balcony, or even at the theatre."

"Very well, my dear girl," exclaimed the countess, who had overheard Marguerite's words. "I am quite willing to take you home at once. But the question is whether we shall find our livery-stable brougham among all those vehicles on the boulevard. This is what comes of deriding my poor old coach," concluded Madame de Serq, laughing.

"Oh! it's useless to look for the brougham I hired," said Marguerite, "I told the coachman that he need not come back till a quarter to twelve. But we can always take a cab."

"A cab!" exclaimed the countess, "you never doubt anything; for my own part I hate cabs—especially at this time of evening—the drivers are not to be depended upon."

"But I can easily go home alone," urged Marguerite.

"That would cap the climax! I will devote myself, mademoiselle, and if one of these gentlemen will kindly procure us a cab—"

"That's useless, my dear madame," interrupted Fernando, "my carriage is at the corner of the Rue Vivienne. It will hold all three of us comfortably; and you will allow me to begin by driving you to the Rue Saint Dominique. I will then see Mademoiselle de Cambremer home, if you are not afraid of trusting her to me."

"What! you are willing to leave the theatre before the finish?" said Madame de Serq.

"Oh! without any regret. I should have been delighted to enjoy the society of these gentlemen all the evening, but they can see that Mademoiselle de Cambremer is not well, and they will excuse me."

"Certainly," said M. de Bolgos, "and I feel sure that my friend Valbourg won't care to stay here. We shall go and finish the evening at the opera-house ball."

"You won't see *us* there," rejoined Fernando, "that amusement isn't intended for us, but you will, no doubt, be kind enough to come and see me on Wednesday; and for the present I presume that you will favour us with your escort to my carriage. The boulevard is in an uproar, and we shall be glad to have your protection."

"We were about to offer it," eagerly responded Valbourg.

He was anxious to have done with all these explanations, for he realised that he should not be able to have another private chat with Mademoiselle de Cambremer that evening, and, for various

reasons, he was glad to recover his liberty. He even meant to try and escape from M. de Bolgos so as to go in search of Justin, whose conduct perplexed him considerably.

"Then it's understood, my dear, isn't it?" asked the countess, turning towards Marguerite, "we will accept Madame Mireille's gracious proposal?"

"Most willingly, so far as I am concerned," replied the young girl.

"Very well then. Your arm, please, Monsieur Valbourg; you won't be the most fortunate; but I am so heavy that I need a strong escort."

The cortego returned in the same order as before to the first tier, and the box-openers were greatly astonished to see the party leave the theatre in the very midst of the performance. In fact, when the ladies were no longer there to hear them, they even ventured to make some very coarse remarks as to the probable cause of this hasty departure.

Valbourg and Bolgos did not take the time to fetch their over-coats, but escorted the ladies to the corner of the Rue Vivienne without mishap. The brawlers had been taken to the police station, and the boulevard had regained its wonted aspect. As Valbourg passed through the throng he certainly overheard some remarks about boxing and "an English lunge," made by a kind of savage who gave vent to incomprehensible oaths; but he had not taken the slightest interest in the scene which he had beheld from the balcony, and he was by no means anxious to learn what had occasioned it. He now saw no signs of the scamp who had asked M. de Bolgos for a light, nor of Justin, nor even of Sornac, the reporter, who pretended he knew everything. They were all of them still in the theatre, no doubt, and to find them it would be necessary to return there.

Fernande's carriage was drawn by two horses of mettle, and her coachman and footman, in dark liveries, were both of imposing aspect. Count de Bolgos, who knew all about such matters, thought it appropriate to compliment Madame Mireille on the stylish appearance of her equipage, and Madame de Serq naïvely exclaimed: "We don't lose by the change, do we, my dear Marguerite? My poor coach and my two old mares would cut a sorry figure beside this superb affair."

Marguerite made no reply. She was evidently preoccupied, and she, indeed, seemed somewhat sad. Although she shook hands with Madame Mireille's gentlemen friends, she did not say a word to them. The countess therefore took the requisite courtesies upon herself. She impartially distributed her thanks and invitations, but she treated Bolgos somewhat differently to Valbourg, as Fernande observed. The former, be it remembered, was a member of the aristocracy, whereas the latter simply belonged to the middle classes. This sufficed for the punctilious dowager not to treat them in the same manner. However, Valbourg paid no attention to the affair, and they all parted on the best of terms.

"The count is a charming man," said Madame de Serq with an air of profound conviction, whilst Fernande's carriage was rapidly rolling in the direction of the Rue St. Dominique. "The Galician—I might say the Polish—nobles of nowadays are always most amiable. No haughtiness and no foolish prejudices. They belong to their time, and yet, withal, they are true aristocrats to the tips of their finger nails. I have heard stories about Monsieur de Bolgos—stories of mad bravery and generosity. He would do anything in the world for the woman he loved. He would sacrifice for her sake his blood and his millions without the slightest hesitation."

"His millions—you speak in the plural—is he so very rich, then?" asked Fernande.

"Very rich, my dear madame. His father, whom I knew, possessed most extensive landed property, which Count Stanislas sold to embark in great industrial schemes, and he has tripled his fortune by intelligent speculation. To my mind his great mistake is in leading so retired a life, whereas he might shine in the first rank of society if he only chose. However, I am certain that he would come to the fore, if he only decided to marry—and I am aware that matrimony has no terrors for him."

Fernande did not insist on the point. This information delighted her, only she was of opinion that Marguerite listened somewhat too attentively to the countess's praises of M. de Bolgos.

The conversation thus gradually fell, and when the carriage stopped outside the entrance of the stately house where Madame de Serq resided, the old lady was already dozing. She woke up, kissed her charming cousin on both cheeks, begged Madame Mireille to take good care of her, and then alighted. Fernande then drove off, still accompanied by Mademoiselle de Cambremer, with whom she was anxious to have an explanation.

"Well," said she, as the carriage rolled back towards the right bank of the Seine, "everything has taken place as I hoped it would; indeed better than I hoped. We can now see one another freely since we have been formally introduced, and I have already found a husband for you."

"A husband, madame?" replied Marguerite, looking astonished.

"Why, yes, the happiest chance in the world brought to the theatre one of my friends who would suit you very well indeed."

"Monsieur de Bolgos? Yes, he is very nice, but—"

"Monsieur de Bolgos isn't in question," said Madame Mireille, drily.

"Then you refer to the other gentleman?"

"Probably. You could not have made a mistake. The count did not pay much attention to you, whereas Monsieur Valbourg—"

"Almost made me a formal declaration. It was rather over eager on his part; but he does not displease me—however, that is all."

"You intend to make a choice, then?" asked Madame Mireille rather ill-humouredly.

"Why, yes, madame. I know very well that I am indebted to you for emerging from my sad position, and I am very grateful to you for the interest you take in me. But whilst availing myself of your kindness, I have not relinquished all personal initiative."

This was said in a manner at once so gentle and so firm that Madame Mircille felt greatly astonished, and realised that she was going upon the wrong track. She more than ever needed Marguerite's assistance, and this was not the moment to make a direct attack. "I expressed myself badly, mademoiselle," said she after a short pause, "or else you failed to understand me. I only desire your happiness, and I at least have the right to give you a little advice. Your object is to marry—"

"To my taste, yes, madame."

"Well, I am acquainted with Monsieur Valbourg, and I feel sure that you could not find a better husband. It is only natural that you shouldn't love him as yet, but I trust that you will do so, and I feel certain that he loves you already. He told me so, in fact, and he will prove it to you. I don't ask you to throw yourself at his head—I merely beg of you not to discourage him."

"I will endeavour to do as you ask, madame, but I cannot promise that I shall succeed," replied Marguerite. "And to be frank, madame, I must tell you that if you did not think fit to continue protecting me, I should not hesitate to confess the truth to the Countess de Serj."

Fernande bit her lips. She had not expected this straight thrust, and she realised how dangerous it would be to force Marguerite to extremes. In presence of such a threat it was best to temporise, for this strange girl was quite capable of acting as she said. "What can I have done to you, for you to speak to me like that?" asked the young widow in a tone which touched Marguerite. "And how can you imagine that I think of abandoning you? You are free and I shall not try to influence your choice. If it pleased you to return to Canada, to-morrow, I should not regret having assisted you. In fact, I should still be your debtor. And shall I add that you have just wounded me by addressing to me a reproach which I do not deserve? But no; you are poorly, that is your excuse. You caught cold on that balcony."

"Cold," muttered the young girl. "No, it wasn't cold, but I had, as it were, a vision which reminded me of the past; a past I curse. However, it was an illusion—a mere dream, and I will not think any more about it. We will remain friends, madame; I sincerely hope that I shall never be parted from you; and I trust that my present position will change, for there is nothing I long for so much as to be able to pay the debt I have contracted towards you."

"Your position, my dear Marguerite? It only depends upon you to change it very soon. The man who loves you is very rich, and he is worthy of you. But it is his business to win your heart. Don't let us talk any more about it, but rely upon me, no matter what may happen."

...
FERNANDE'S CHOICE.

This brought the conversation to a close, and when Fernand re-entered her carriage, after accompanying Mademoiselle de Cambremer as far as her apartments, she reflected as follows : "There is not another moment to be lost. That girl is half crazy, and if let her follow her inclination, my double vengeance would escape me. I must see Clorinde to-morrow, and, between us, we will devise a means of bringing matters to a close. Before another week is over, Jacques must have proposed in proper form ; and Monsieur de Bolgos must have asked me for my hand. I shall not refuse him, but if matters were delayed, Marguerite might steal him from me."

IV.

It is past midnight, and the ornate frontage of the Grand Opera-house is ablaze with light. The electric lamps on the vast open space in front of the palace of music, pale in presence of this blinding illumination. It is as light as if it were day-time, and the boulevard is as crowded as it is on the evening after the Grand Prix de Paris. Vehicles ply to and fro along the roadway ; and on the broad foot pavement, the crowd strolls past—looking like an endless black serpent spotted red. The red spots are the feathers of the “chicard,” “balachard,” and “clodoche” maskers, who force their way along, indulging in idiotic shouts. They do not seem to be in any hurry to earn the two francs which the ball managers allow them, so that the opera masquerades may not be deficient in what is called “French gaiety.” The fact is, the genuine public has not yet entered the vast structure dedicated to Apollo and Terpsichore, and the paid dancers still have time enough to enter the neighbouring taverns, and gargle themselves with highly peppered brandy, in view of clearing their throats and imparting additional agility to their legs.

Not far from the opera-house, at the corner of a well-frequented street, a kind of American bar competes with the innumerable French establishments patronised by nocturnal bibbers. This place is not by any means as stylish as the *Café Anglais*, nor is it on the same level as a common dram shop. It occupies a kind of intermediate position, and contrary to the general rule in Paris, you there drink standing, in front of a bar where numerous young *Hebes* officiate—*Hebes* presumed to be of Cockney or Yankee birth, but as a rule born at *Batignolles* or at *Pantin*, just outside the capital of civilization. This bar is a favourite meeting place with certain spurious Parisian “mashers,” young fellows who wear low hats vulgarly denominated “melons ;” and bookmakers, backers, grooms and coachmen off duty are also to be found there with a fair sprinkling of hobbledehoys, who are “spoons” on the damsels behind the bar.

On the nights when a masquerade ball takes place at the opera-house, sitting accommodation is exceptionally provided, and there is then a rush for the little tables on which what pretends to be a supper is served. It thus happened, that on the night we write of, a fancy milkmaid who sat alone in a corner, in front of a bottle of

pale ale, had no end of trouble to retain her place. She was masked, but she displayed a pair of white, well-rounded shoulders, neat ankles, and well-shod feet, so that she was assailed with compliments often of a very forward description. All the wines and all the hams displayed in the windows were offered to her in turn, in exchange for the right of sitting at her table ; but she did not allow herself to be tempted, and she had mettle enough to keep all the customers in the place at bay. The boldest among them lowered their flags in presence of this damsel who was so prompt, both with her tongue and her hands. There was a semi-circle in front of her, and roars of laughter greeted her lively sallies and often threatening gestures. "I am waiting for some one who'll silence you all, my hearties." This was her invariable refrain, and a facetious bibber at last went off, calling out, "It appears that that lady is waiting for a senator."

Tired of teasing her, the customers finally left her alone, and when the person she expected came in, at about a quarter to one o'clock, attention was mainly being devoted to a party of fellows in plumes and helmets who had just tumultuously invaded the establishment. This was just as well for the milkmaid's friend, for otherwise he might have had to pick a quarrel with the people who had chaffed the damsel. He was a well-dressed fellow—in swallow-tails and a white tie, but he wore a card-board nose, and this carnivalesque appendage would have won him all sorts of jeers, had not the attention of the customers been turned in another direction. Thanks to the diversion created by the plumed and helmetted party, he came in almost unnoticed, and at once approached the milkmaid, who gave him what is often indifferently styled a cold or a warm reception.

"You mustn't repeat this again, my fine fellow," she said, pushing a chair which she had managed to retain, towards him. "I don't like people to make fun of me, and if I had imagined that you would have kept me here like this, I shouldn't have come."

"I swear to you, Mariette, that it wasn't my fault," responded the new comer.

"No ! it was mine, eh ? Do you fancy that I should have been at all embarrassed to find another escort ? Why, a score of fellows already have offered to take me to the ball, and much more stylish fellows than you."

"I have no doubt of it, my dear ; but allow me to remark that you did not expect to be free till one o'clock."

"Well, what of that ? Even if I had been obliged to remain at the house it was your business to come and wait for me here. Mademoiselle came in at ten o'clock, and dismissed me five minutes afterwards. I hurried from the Place Vendôme to the Rue de Greffulhe, dressed, and got here at a quarter to twelve. You can imagine how nice it was to find myself assailed by a party of idiots who wanted to stand me sandwiches. This bar is a nice place, I

must say ; and if ever you want to make an appointment with me again, don't make it here, for I sha'n't come, I tell you."

" Well, I was perhaps wrong, for it is a little mixed here. There're too many servants. I just caught sight of the valet of one of my master's friends. Fortunately he did not recognise me ; but, as for the delay, you told me that your mistress was going to the theatre."

" And she went there with that old Marchioness of Carabas ; but it seems that the play bored her, and so she went off before the finish. Those foreign women are all the same—they are half crazy, and never stay in the same place. It's impossible to rely upon having one's evening to oneself."

" No doubt ! But with my governor it's different. He is regulated like clock work. I helped him to dress at six o'clock, and I sha'n't see anything more of him till to-morrow morning ; for the last three weeks he has been going to bed at daybreak. All the same, Mariette, I advise you to stay with that American heiress of yours. It's a good situation, and it will become a still better one when you have had the house-warming in the Rue Galilée."

" I don't say the contrary, as I have already made twelve louis in a fortnight merely out of the tradespeople's gratuities. But I don't know whether it will last. It is all very well for the baroness to tell me that mademoiselle has millions and millions in her own country ; for my part I feel mistrustful. People who are really rich don't throw money out of window."

" Ah, yes ! that baroness you know—let us say a word or two about her. How does it happen that I have never seen her ? you would never even tell me her address."

" Of course I wouldn't. Please understand that I don't gossip with my admirers about people who take an interest in me. Now, the baroness takes a great interest in me because I was in the service of one of her friends who met with misfortune, and whenever she needs an intelligent girl she remembers me. During the last three years she has procured me two situations, in which I made a deal of money. Recently, you know, I was with some middle-class folks—in a perfect hole—but the baroness came to fetch me, and sent me to wait on that American miss."

" Does she keep a servants' agency, then ?"

" How stupid you are ! I tell you that she is a real baroness !"

" Well, what does she do, then ?"

" That doesn't concern me, nor you either. But that's enough chatter about things that can't interest you. And, now, how does it happen that you have come here dressed like that to take me to the opera-house ? You promised that you would come in pearl-grey breeches and top-boots—but you are in evening-dress I'm sure. I'll bet that you have got a pair of swallow-tails under your over-coat. You no doubt mean to lounge about in hopes of making a conquest of some woman of society, and you fancy that in the meanwhile I shall toe and heel it with a parcel of clowns. who

won't even offer me some refreshment. Oh ! you'll have a deal of success among the ladies, with that card-board ~~noise~~ of yours."

"Just listen to me, Mariette, and you'll learn a lot of interesting things—and, after that, if you are a good girl, and will give me an hour or two's liberty, I'll go and fetch you in the corner where you like to dance a quadrille, and take you to supper—there shall be some crayfish—there now !"

"Oh ! if you promise me crayfish ! But, come, out with your story, what is it ?"

"Well, what would you say if I told you I had been offered a situation as secretary ?"

"As secretary ? Are there good wages—and any *perks* ?"

"You are always poking fun. You would do much better to let me speak. I have become acquainted this evening with a gentleman who will make my fortune, if I only consent to remain with him."

"Where did you meet this gentleman—"

"On the boulevard, just as he was being taken to the police-station."

"What humbug is this ?"

"Wait a bit. I was strolling about just outside the Variétés theatre—waiting for the time to go and dress before meeting you—when all of a sudden I saw two disreputable fellows shoving a gentleman about. The gentleman gave them a taste of his fists, whereupon all the fools who were looking on took the part of the two loafers. The police collared hold of the gentleman, and as I always take sides with well-dressed folks, it's instinctive with me, I followed him and the police to the commissary's office. Once there I said that I had seen the beginning of the affair, and that the two roughs were in the wrong. In point of fact, I had only seen the affair from a distance, but I looked respectable, and so the commissary believed me. To be brief, the gentleman was released after giving a couple of louis as an indemnity for the two blows he had dealt, and it wasn't too high a price, for he had hit the fellows precious hard. Well, we two, he and I, went away from the commissary's office arm in-arm. He asked me my name, I gave it him, he asked me what my profession was, I told him the first story that came into my head. He showed himself very friendly, we drank a glass together at a café, and then he took me to the Grand Hôtel, where he is staying, and there he told me that he didn't know anyone in Paris, that he had a thousand francs a day to spend, and that if I liked I could stay with him. Of course, I answered him : 'We will see about that later on, for I am going to the opera-ball to-night ;' and that is proof that I hadn't forgotten you, Mariette. However, he replied that he was going to the opera himself, and finally he gave me an appointment for two o'clock in the lounge."

"What ! do you believe in foreigners ? For that fellow must be a foreigner, sure enough. You are nicely caught if you rely on him to make your fortune," said Mariette ; and a moment later she added :

"He is either a numbug or a swindler, I'll be bound."

"At all events he isn't hard up. As I went out of the hotel I met an employé, whom I used to know at Monaco, and he told me that the gentleman had taken a suite of rooms costing three thousand francs a month. He's an American, it seems, and he has come from California, where he has made millions."

"If he has come to Paris to spend them, something may be done with him perhaps," said Mariette, sagaciously.

"No, it's far more funny than that, my dear. He has come to Paris in search of a woman—a woman he has lost and wants to find again."

"What *are* you talking about? A man doesn't lose a woman just as he loses a dog. Why doesn't your American put an advertisement in the papers?"

"He may perhaps decide to do so, but that's just what I want to prevent."

"Why? What can it matter to you?"

"Well, I should like to earn the reward he offers."

"Ah! How much does the reward amount to?"

"He told me he would give me whatever I liked."

"Whatever you like—that's rather vague."

"So it is, and for that reason I mean to ask him to specify the amount."

"And we'll go shares, eh?"

"Of course we will—and the more readily as you will perhaps be able to help me."

"I should think so. I haven't my equal for ferreting out information. If I had only chosen to furnish the police with reports about the people I have served, I should have a pile of money by me. But, then, I'm honest, I am. I may be a lady's-maid, but I don't betray my employers. Still, that won't prevent me from helping you in this affair, and if you will promise me a share I'll find your millionaire's princess for you. But what woman is she—his wife, eh?"

"No, I don't think so."

"His sweetheart then?"

"I really don't know as yet. He didn't explain himself, but I'll make him do so by-and-bye."

"Well, I suppose he told you what he thought of doing to find her?"

"He only told me that she had moved without leaving her address."

"Then he knew where she had been living?"

"Probably."

"If she went off without saying where she was going, she can't care to see him."

"That seems likely; but I repeat, my dear, that the Californian didn't enter into details. He said a few things while chatting, and I made a mental note of them; but I wasn't such a fool as to cross-

question him like that right off. He would have mistrusted me. However, by a little manœuvring I shall get him to tell me his affairs without asking him about them. And if he asks me to undertake the search I shan't jump at it in a hurry. He must take me for a well-bred young man, willing to accept a good situation, but not eager to pounce down upon the first comer."

"If he discovered that you were only a valet, all your plans would be upset. You will have to tell him where you live."

"Why shouldn't I? Haven't I a private lodging? Can't he call upon Monsieur Justin Durand in the Rue de Castellane—a modest abode, but quite sufficient for the requirements of a studious young fellow? Besides, I flatter myself that my person and language won't prevent him from believing the story I told him. The son of the old officer, who left me just enough to live upon, I received an excellent education—"

"Oh! I know your story, so you needn't relate it over again. But all the same, Justin, you are certainly not a fool."

"Thanks for the good opinion you have of me, my dear. I shall try to remain worthy of it," replied Justin with perfect composure.

"However, if you want to remain sharp all through," interrupted Mariette, "you won't amuse yourself by attending to that American's correspondence. What's the use of becoming a secretary? Remain a valet as you are now! There's no better situation than that. I shall work and save on my side, and in five or six years from now we shall be able to marry."

Justin restrained a grimace. The prospective happiness which Mariette dreamt of had, evidently, no delights for him; still he did not wish to quarrel with her at the very moment when she might prove useful. "All right, let's become people of means. I don't ask anything better," he responded with a laugh. "But to begin with, you must let me tackle my man. As I don't want to miss him it's high time for us to be off."

"But that card-board nose of yours? Why do you wear that? It makes you look frightfully ugly."

"No doubt it does; but if I didn't wear it, and my governor happened to come to the ball he would recognise me."

"What! does your master go to the masquerade? I thought that he had settled down for good?"

"Oh! he has been very unsettled for some time past. But it's all the same to me. His goings-on don't interfere with my amusement."

"All the same, you were much better situated when you were staying with Monsieur de Bolgos. In the first place, he's a count, and it's flattering to serve a nobleman. And besides, you made more money."

"Oh! I had had enough of him," rejoined Justin, who did not like to talk about his former employer, "and then the Rue Jean Gougon was too far from the Rue de Greffulhe, where you lived."

"How complimentary you are this evening! Well, as a reward,

I'll allow you to go and see your Californian in the lounge—but you must come and fetch me before four o'clock, near the orchestra, on the left, you know."

"Be easy, but let us go. If I made the Californian wait he might decamp."

"All right. We'll start. My pale ale is paid for." With these words Mariette threw over her shoulders a mantle generously given her by her new mistress, and took Justin's arm.

They reached the door without mishap. The mashers drinking at the bar had drawn all the other customers around them. "I can't get accustomed to that paste-board nose of yours," said the maid, as she set foot in the street. "Do you really mean to keep on wearing it?"

"I will take it off when I come to fetch you."

"You would do much better to take it off at once; if you don't your Californian won't dare to walk about with you."

"Pooh! don't bother. I'll persuade him that a paste-board nose is the height of fashion over here."

"If he believes that he must be a stupid! But so much the better. You will have less trouble in getting some money out of him."

These remarks and others in a similar strain occupied the interesting couple until they reached the Place de l'Opéra. Mariette was anxious to learn if the foreigner, whom Justin had become acquainted with, spoke French well, if he were a good-looking fellow, and how old he was. In fact, she asked so many questions that the valet, who felt annoyed, left her as soon as they had entered the theatre—not, however, without once more swearing that he would go to fetch her for supper, and that crayfish should be included in the bill of fare.

The valet had by no means invented the adventure which he had just related to his inamorata. He had not entered the Variétés for the sake of the performance; he had meant to wait there and have a chat with his master as soon as the piece was played. He had a warning to give M. Valbourg, and would have liked to give it him in the house, but the Count de Bolgos did not leave Jacques for a minute, and Justin had finally seen them enter the box of Madame Mireille together. Then, certainly, the count did absent himself for a moment, but Valbourg was still not alone. Finally Justin saw his master retire with M. de Bolgos, Madame Mireille, Madame de Serq, and Marguerite, whom he did not know, and he soon came to the conclusion that they would not return. He then went out on to the boulevard to smoke a cigarette, leaving the theatre just as the American was pommelling the two roughs, and as the Countess de Serq and her companions decided to leave the balcony. The rest of the adventure had been in accordance with Justin's narrative to Mariette, and the enterprising valet hoped that matters would not rest there. He was a shrewd fellow and realised all the advantage that he might reap by following the fortunes of this trans-

atlantic capitalist who had just arrived in Paris. It was no doubt very praiseworthy, but it was also extremely dangerous to defend M. Valbourg against M. de Bolgos, and Justin would infinitely have preferred a situation abroad.

It was half-past one — the psychological moment — when he reached the Opera-house. Scores of masqueraders were hurrying to dance, giving vent to strange shouts ; and processions of belaced dominoes were ascending the grand staircase between serried rows of young swells who were trying to recognise this or that beauty despite her disguise. People were stifling in the passages on the grand tier, and one could hardly move in the lounge. Through a large opening, overlooking the auditorium, one could see the throng sway and revolve in an endless waltz amid the brazen clang of the orchestra. Outside the boxes, the doors of which were mostly open, groups of excited dandies were gathered ; laughter resounded on all sides and witticisms flew about thick and fast.

Justin had nothing to do in this direction, but he was early, despite what he had said to Mariette, and might venture upon a halt before trying to force his way into the lounge, with which he was not very familiar. He had previously come to the balls, but with his sweetheart on his arm, and he, himself, in full masquerade costume ; and it happens that men in costume are not admitted into the splendid gallery where Baudry's paintings glow amid the electric light. Justin, therefore, now asked himself if he should find his Californian among so many gentlemen in dress-coats, and he began to repent not having selected a less frequented part of the house as a meeting-place. The idea finally occurred to him of giving a glance at the auditorium and he thereupon descended the communicating steps. Once below, upon ensconcing himself in a corner, he was able to take a good look at the crowded boxes, and he knew the position of the one rented by the club to which Valbourg and Bolgos belonged. He knew this, indeed, as he had seen them together in it, at the previous ball ; and there they were again, on this occasion, standing up, near the front, and glancing around them.

“Good,” reflected Justin, “no misfortune has befallen the governor so far ; and besides, it seemed to me strange that the count should have pointed him out to those ruffians. And yet they were all a-foot this evening. I recognised one of them and saw him speak to the count on the pretext of asking him for a light. The count had probably made him a sign as he wanted to indicate some lucrative job for to-night. As for my master, however, Bolgos wouldn’t have him attacked in the street. He’s waiting for Monsieur Valbourg to remove his money from the broker’s, and he no doubt imagines that I shall find out the new combination word by which the safe is closed and opened. The false key is ready and the work will probably be entrusted to me again. Fortunately, my master is forewarned ; but no matter, it’s a great mistake for him to shew himself about so much with Bolgos, who will surely be

caught one of these fine days. It isn't my fault, indeed, if he hasn't been caught already."

Justin had reached this point in his reflections when there came a movement of retreat among the waltzers revolving around the space set aside for dancing. One couple had come in contact with an obstacle, the others had in their turn been ~~been~~ brought to a standstill, and now there was a deal of pushing and twisting in various directions. The obstacle which had occasioned all this confusion was a man, a species of giant who had taken it into his head to try and pass through the throng without paying the least attention to the direction in which the dancers were turning. Although Justin could only see this person's back he recognised him at once, for he was a head taller than most of the people about him and he wore a most extraordinary hat—akin both to a helmet and an umbrella, so high was its crown, and so broad were its brims. Now Justin recognised this monumental head-gear from having espied it some hours previously upon the boulevard outside the Variétés theatre, but he had scarcely expected to see it again at the Opera House, where well-bred or wealthy people do not usually exhibit themselves in eccentric attire.

"There's no doubt about it: that Californian is a real savage," thought the valet; "he would soon get himself turned out if I didn't go to his help."

Justin suited his actions to his words, but the transatlantic gentleman had already rid himself of the people pressing against him, and needed no assistance in clearing the way. He walked on majestically, quite indifferent to the shouts of the crowd, and the waltz was again following its course, the turning couples now carefully avoiding a collision with the eccentric foreigner.

"What, are you here, sir?" said Justin, as he approached him. "It was lucky that I did not go to the lounge in search of you."

"Ah! so it's you!" exclaimed the foreigner after some slight hesitation. "I should never have known you if you had not spoken to me. Why are you wearing a nose like that? You look frightful."

"The fact is I fear being compromised. The opera ball isn't attended by serious-minded young men and I don't want to be seen here."

"Then why have you come?"

"Because you told me that you should feel very bored if you came alone."

"That's true! I'm obliged to you for coming, and in fact I greatly need your help, for I have had a lot of disagreeable adventures since I crossed the threshold of this place. I was allowed to come in without any observation being made, but when I wanted to enter that long gallery called the lounge I was pushed back, and people told me that men in disguise were not allowed to enter it."

"Ah! I have it!" exclaimed Justin; "it was all the fault of your hat."

"My hat? Ought I to have taken it off, then? But there are any number of people with their hats on—you are wearing your own."

"It isn't that; but yours is rather strange—and it was taken as forming part of a fancy costume."

"Can't a man wear whatever head-gear he pleases in Paris?"

"Well, yes, he can—only—"

"You mean that when a man wears a hat different to other people's he can't go about everywhere."

"It's stupid, certainly, but custom you know—"

"I don't care a fig for custom. Only I want to spend an hour at the ball. Where can I station myself without being turned away? It's very uncomfortable just here. Shall I be allowed to stay in a box?"

"Providing that you know some one who rents one."

"Oh! I engaged one this morning at the hotel. I said that I wanted a box at any price, and this is the ticket that was brought me."

"It must have cost you a stiff price—a side box—grand tier—one of the best too!" said Justin, after examining the ticket which the foreigner held out to him. "You will be quite at home there, and capitally situated so as to see everything. If you had only told me that you had this ticket I would have pointed out to you what you would have to do to go straight up to your box."

"Well, you can at least show me the way now—and stay there with me. Since chance has brought us together, I hope that we sha'n't part before the morning."

"I should be glad to stay with you, but—"

"Come, come, you can acquaint me with your duties when we are in the box."

Justin took good care not to decline an invitation which agreed so well with his secret wishes. He had not ventured to hope for a prolonged tête-à-tête, but he now meant to try and obtain complete information anent the foreigner's quest after the woman he was interested in; and also to secure an engagement as secretary or factotum. He felt quite disposed to give up Mariette if need were, so as to please the American. And in point of fact he could not willingly miss making his fortune for the sake of partaking of some crayfish in the company of an eccentric lady's-maid.

"You have done right not to take off your overcoat," said he as he guided the transatlantic millionaire along the passages. "I should advise you to keep it on. People will think you are afraid of catching cold and won't know whether you wear evening dress or not. You have luckily put on a white tie, I see."

"And a dress coat as well," muttered the foreigner.

"Oh! all right then. Your hat's the only thing out of keeping. However, you can take it off in the box."

This advice was worth following, for everyone turned round as the helmetted giant passed along, and the box-opener looked very

attentively at his ticket before deciding to admit him. She evidently suspected that he had either stolen the ticket or found it in the street. Justin's card-board nose, moreover, inspired her with as much distrust as his companion's headgear ; and she only felt at ease when she saw a gold coin glitter in the foreigner's hand. Thereupon she at once opened the box. As soon as the American was seated he decided to take his hat off to the great satisfaction of Justin, who did not at all wish to become a target for opera-glasses. His master was near by, and Monsieur de Bolgos also ; indeed at this very moment, they were passing the occupants of the various boxes in review.

It was a great mistake on the foreigner's part to "sport" such ridiculous headgear, for he had a superb head set on his Herculean shoulders. It would indeed have been an Apollo-like head, had he not worn a long silky beard somewhat sparse about the cheeks. The sun of the new world had imparted a bronze-like tinge to his complexion ; his blue eyes were soft and frank, and his lips parted, from time to time, to smile ; though, as a rule, they were mainly expressive of somewhat disdainful indifference. With his imposing stature, his regular features, and sympathetic air, this bold pioneer of the Far West would have been noticed anywhere. He seemed to command attention.

"Have I told you my name ?" he now said to Justin, who scarcely expected this beginning.

"No ; but you told it to the commissary of police," replied the valet smiling, "and it amounts to the same thing, since I was with you when you were questioned."

"That's true ; I had forgotten it."

"Well, I haven't forgotten that you are Monsieur Francis Laramie, that you are an engineer, and that you were born in Canada, which explains why you speak French so well. I even remember that, to prove that you were not a vagabond, you pulled a large package of banknotes out of your pocket at the commissary's, and you must allow me to tell you that it is very imprudent to display so much money in Paris."

"Oh ! I always have about a hundred thousand francs upon me, and I don't care if I lose them."

"I can understand that, at cards : but one should never tempt thieves, and the two scamps you pommelled were there when you displayed your money."

"Oh ! I don't fear anyone, and, besides, the scamps in question have had a taste of my fists. They won't try it on again. But let us talk of something else. I want to ask you a question. Do any respectable women ever come to the opera masquerades ?"

"Yes, sometimes, on their husband's arms just to see the sight ; but it is quite exceptional, I must tell you," replied Justin.

"H'm. So a young girl of good birth would be greatly compromised if she were seen here ?" asked the Canadian.

"Oh ! she would lose caste at once. Still girls are brought up so

badly nowadays, that perhaps some come here, all the same. Only they are so closely masked and hooded that one would have great difficulty in recognising them."

"Yes; with a lot of lace hiding their faces they would have nothing to fear."

"Oh! their voices might betray them," said Justin, "and indeed an experienced person may recognise an acquaintance despite all her precautions. My sweetheart might muffle herself up to her chin, but I'm sure I should recognise her. However, I don't think you would be expert enough."

"Oh! no, I shouldn't recognise any one. If I had known that all the women here were masked, I shouldn't have come."

"Then you hoped that you might meet here, that person whom you spoke to me about?" asked Justin.

"I didn't hope it," replied Monsieur Laramie; "no, for one only hopes what one desires."

"And you would be sorry to see this person in such a questionable place? Still, you no doubt had some suspicions and wanted to verify them," urged the valet.

"No—it was a chance idea of mine, but I see that I shall lose my time here."

"I fear you will; but one always ends by finding a person in Paris," added Justin by way of consolation.

"No doubt; that is, if one applies to the police, but I don't want to have recourse to them," answered the Canadian.

"You are right in that, for the police often make a deal of fuss all to no purpose. Besides the officials act roughly, without any tact—they ought not to be applied to in delicate matters—and if the woman whom you want to find is closely connected with you it will be far better to apply to a private person. You will need a man well acquainted with Parisian life, at once skilful and discreet, and inspiring you with enough confidence for you to tell him—"

"That my betrothed is in question," interrupted Francis Laramie.
"Yes, that is how the matter stands."

Justin had not expected this statement, for he had fancied that the wealthy foreigner was running after some American "irregular," who had crossed the ocean to settle in Paris. At the outset he had certainly asked himself whether the Canadian's lawful wife was in question, for in America as in England, women who fail to find the necessary "affinities" in their husbands, are prone to elope with gay Lotharios; however, in that case, the deserted husbands seldom run after the fugitives. The Americans, especially, are practical people, not inclined to neglect their business for the sake of a faithless woman. Justin, who was aware of all this, had therefore relinquished such an improbable supposition. But Monsieur Francis Laramie in search of his betrothed—that was even more extraordinary! The term "betrothed" is scarcely used in current conversation, and it may admit of various interpretations. Justin therefore decided to induce his companion to be more

explicit. "What, sir!" he exclaimed, "were you on the point of marrying in America, and did the person who was to have been your wife suddenly disappear—on the eve of your wedding, perhaps?"

"Not at all," coldly replied the foreigner. "It is a much more simple affair. Three years ago, I became acquainted with a young girl in Canada. We fell in love. She swore to me that she would never have any husband but me; only unfortunately we had no money, or rather we had none left. All that I possessed—but a trifling amount—and a hundred thousand dollars of hers—had been sunk, lost beyond redemption in mining enterprises."

"Oh! oh!" reflected Justin, "is this American nabob a fraud? If he ruined his betrothed, I am not surprised that she should have run away from him."

"Having lost all this money," now resumed M. Laramie, "we resolved to separate for a time. She was acquainted with France where she had some relatives, so she decided that she would wait for me in Paris and she came here. On my side, I went off to Colorado—a part of the world where a bold, skilful man may even nowadays grow rich in a short space of time—and I made a million dollars there."

"And she is aware of it?" asked the sceptical valet. "In that case, a French-woman would never have deserted you."

"No, she is not aware of it," was the reply. "I led a wretched life during the earlier months that followed upon our parting, and I made my fortune by a sudden stroke without being able to inform her of it."

"Then it's different. She must have grown tired of waiting. It is always dangerous to leave a woman without news of one. But didn't she give you any news of herself?"

"She often wrote to me—at least, at the outset of her sojourn in Paris, only all her letters didn't reach me. I was living in a wild part of the country."

"Where the postal service works very badly, I understand. However, the letters you received must have contained some information as to where she was living; the people she associated with, and the life she led."

"She told me that she had resolved not to go and see a lady, her cousin, who would probably have given her a very cordial greeting; that she preferred to live alone until my return which she expected was near at hand; and that she had taken some modest lodgings in a quiet neighbourhood."

"And you went to look for her there on your arrival, I suppose?" said Justin.

"Yes, and I learnt that she had left the house some three weeks previously," answered Laramie heaving a sigh.

"Without saying where she was going?"

"Without saying anything. She came in one evening with a cab. She had her trunks carried downstairs by the doorkeeper of

the house. They were put on the cab which drove away ; and she has not since been seen."

"But, don't you think that she may have gone to stay with the cousin you just spoke about ? If she had adopted that course, you wouldn't have much trouble in finding her."

"On the contrary, I should have a deal of trouble, for I don't know the cousin's name or address."

"Not even her name !" urged Justin.

"No, indeed ; and I am not even aware whether my betrothed has resumed her real name —by which she was always known in Canada ; or whether she has continued giving merely her Christian name. My letters were always addressed : ' Mademoiselle Marguerite, 99 Rue du Rocher, Paris.' "

"That's something worth knowing," thought Justin.

"You will understand why she took such precautions," added M. Laramie, "she belongs to one of the oldest and most honourable Canadian families. She had compromised herself for my sake, and would not show herself in public until the past had been wiped out. She was waiting for me."

"She has perhaps gone back to Canada, to wait for you there," suggested the valet.

"I thought of that, but it isn't likely. She would have written to tell me that she had decided to return—or, on leaving her lodgings, she would have left a letter for me. But I questioned the doorkeeper and gave him my name, all to no avail."

"Then she must still be in Paris."

"I fear so."

"You fear so ? Why's that ? You told me that you would give any amount to be able to find her again."

"And I repeat it. Only, if she has stayed here, one of two things must have happened. Either her money was at an end and she is hiding, so as to conceal her misery ; or else, tired of suffering, and irritated by my silence, she has come to believe that I have forgotten her—that I am dead perhaps—and then in a fit of anger or despair, she has listened to some other man."

"Such things often happen in Paris," remarked the sagacious Justin, "especially when a pretty woman is in question."

"There are but few women in France as beautiful as Marguerite is," said the Canadian gravely.

"Then your last supposition may be correct," retorted the valet. "But may I venture to ask, sir, what course you would follow if you ascertained that she had done as you suggest ?"

"I would strangle the man she had listened to."

"The douce ! That would be rather hot. But what should you do as regards herself ?"

"I should hand her back her fortune, two-fold, and never see her again."

"But it would be more simple to renounce searching for her. You would spare yourself great grief and serious embarrassment."

"I shall only renounce the search after trying every possible course. To begin with, I shall get my arrival in Paris announced in the newspapers. By paying, that can be easily managed."

"Perhaps she doesn't read the newspapers," retorted Justin, "and even if this announcement should meet her eyes, she may still persist in hiding herself. If your supposition, as to her having met with some one else, is correct, she can hardly care to see you ; so, in my opinion, it would be better not to let her know that you are here. Paris is wide, it is true, but women go to the Bois, to the theatre, and there is nothing to prevent your going there as well."

"That was just my idea, and I even vaguely hoped that to-night at this ball--but I now see that I was mistaken."

"Will you give me carte-blanche to start a search ?"

"What ? here ?"

"No, it would be useless. But elsewhere. I will begin by the Rue du Rocher. I know how to make a doorkeeper chat, and perhaps I shall obtain more information than you did. I shall then make some inquiries of various friends of mine who go into all sorts of society. I shall ask them if they have not heard of a beautiful young foreigner recently arrived in Paris, and, if you will allow me to see you every day, I will keep you acquainted with the progress of my search."

"That would suit me ; but, haven't you anything to do ?" asked the Canadian abruptly.

Justin had not foreseen this objection, still it did not take him aback. "No, unfortunately," he replied, half sorrowfully. "I had a small fortune but I have spent the greater part of it, and, just now, I am hesitating as to my course. I was decently educated, I'm willing, and I fancy I am apt enough in several respects though I have never had a chance of turning any talent to account. We are not in America where a courageous young fellow generally makes his way. Money is needed in Paris, and if I had my little capital still intact, I shouldn't be uneasy as regards the future. Unfortunately, however, I have to content myself with my present scanty means, and as a result I have a deal of time at my disposal ; I should therefore be very glad to devote it to assisting you."

"Would you follow me to America ?" asked M. Francis Laramie.

"Certainly I would—with the greatest delight," replied Justin, "but you don't think of returning there yet awhile."

"Oh ! I shall go back there in a month's time, if nothing fresh happens. I should never accustom myself to living here. I feel stifled in a great city like this."

"And you would take me with you ? Ah ! I only wish you would start to-morrow. However, in the meanwhile, pray dispose of me if I can be useful to you in any way."

"All right. I will take you at your word. Let us go off."

"What ? leave the ball already ? Why we have only just arrived."

"Oh ! the noise deafens me and the sight of all those women in black hoods makes me feel sad. If the one I want to find is among

them I shall not recognise her, but she will see me. That is to be avoided as you just pointed out. So let us go off. It was agreed that you were not to leave me."

"All right, I will see you as far as the door of the Grand Hotel," said Justin.

"Not at all—I am not going home, I shouldn't be able to sleep."

"Oh! if you prefer to sup, it's the same to me," said Justin, quite oblivious of his appointment with Mariette.

"Sup? No, no, I'm not hungry," responded M. Laramie.

"Then I hardly know what one could do at this time of night. If I belonged to any club, I would take you there at once; but I'm not a member of any place of the kind."

"However, you are fond of play?"

"Play," repeated Justin, stupefied—"Ah! you mean gambling—Yes, certainly—that is to say I used to gamble a little, once upon a time."

"When a person has once cared for play, he always cares for it. As for myself, I feel the need of some powerful emotion to free me from my present thoughts. I should like to win or lose a large sum to-night. Come on, my dear fellow."

"But, one can't play without money," stammered the valet who was more and more surprised.

"And, no doubt, you have only a small sum about you," quietly remarked the Canadian. "But, what does that matter since I have a hundred thousand francs in my note-case? That's my pocket money, and I shall be delighted to place a few bank notes at your disposal, so as to enable you to play a game. Take ten of them, my dear fellow."

Justin's eyes blazed with covetousness as he gazed at the notes which his generous friend held out to him; however, he did not dare to touch them.

"Come, come," said Laramie, "put these notes in your pocket. If they enable you to win some money, I shall be delighted, and if you lose, it will be of no consequence. I will hand you some others to-morrow. As you are going to take my affairs in hand, I must at least provide you with the sinews of war. You mustn't begin campaigning at your own expense."

"Really, I don't know whether I ought—" began Justin.

"Come, come," interrupted Laramie, thrusting the notes into the valet's hands. "I shall still be under obligations to you, for without your assistance I might have some trouble in finding the house I was told about."

"A gambling house?"

"Oh! not a public one—but I have an invitation for myself and a friend. One of my compatriots procured it for me—an American whom I found at the Grand Hotel, on my arrival there. I had previously known him in Colorado."

"You will meet him at the gambling house, then?"

"No—he left to-day for Havre—on his way to the United States,

but, yesterday evening, while we were dining together, he asked me if I should like to gamble a bit of an evening, while I stayed here. I answered 'yes,' whereupon he handed me two invitation cards, telling me what I should have to do to secure admission—for only people known or recommended by *habitues* are received."

"I understand. There are signs and a password, no doubt. It is the same thing at all houses of the kind. This place is simply a vulgar gambling den, and if I might venture to give you a little advice—"

"Well, what?"

"Well, I should advise you not to go there. There is nothing so dangerous as places of that kind."

"Dangerous, why, pray?"

"First of all, the police makes a raid at the moment when one least expects it. The commissary seizes all the stakes, arrests the people who keep the establishment, and requires all the players to give him their names and addresses. It sometimes happens, too, that he sends them to—"

"To the police-station," finished M. Laramie gaily. "Well, I have already been there, and the fear of returning won't deter me from gambling whenever I take it into my head to do so."

"I understand that; you come from a free country, where people are in the habit of doing very much as they like. Still, the almost positive certainty of being robbed may perhaps deter you."

"Robbed? How? In the street. But you know very well that I have a pair of good fists as weapons—"

"Which you know how to use? Granted. I saw you at work, remember. But your fists wouldn't avail you in contending against sharpers, who might use marked cards so as to win your bank notes from you."

"If I detected them cheating, I should kill them without the slightest ceremony or remorse."

"No doubt; but men of that kind don't let themselves be detected. Some of them even find their way into the best managed clubs, and carry on their lucrative calling with impunity."

"I have certainly heard that what you say has happened," rejoined M. Laramie, "but, in the present case, there is no club in question. My American friend assured me that the rooms, where I mean to take you to-night, were frequented by highly respectable people."

"Oh! yes, high-livers and hussies, with nothing to lose. But all that glitters is not gold. You must have heard that saying before," retorted Justin. "Your American friend may have been mistaken."

"At all events, he wasn't robbed, for he constantly won, and even considerable amounts on some occasions."

"No doubt; but the sharpers hoped that he would ultimately lose a much larger sum. They themselves began by losing so as to lead him on. They even have fellows who 'decoy' the wealthy foreigners who arrive in Paris."

"Do you imagine that an attempt has been made to impose upon

me?" asked the Canadian, bursting into loud laughter. "Please understand that my Colorado friend has a fortune of at least fifteen hundred thousand dollars."

"Well, all the same I hold to the opinion that he was extremely lucky in not leaving them behind him at the place he mentioned to you."

"But I just told you that he went off after realising very handsome profits. And I hope that I shall be as lucky as he was. Not that I care so much about winning money; but play relieves me from my anxieties, and for the sake of a little excitement I shouldn't even mind if I lost. However, I can readily understand that you are not in the same frame of mind as myself, and I don't want to impose anything unpleasant upon you. Pray be kind enough to see me as far as the door of the place. You can leave me there and then come back to the ball if you like—It seems that the place is near here, but I don't know anything about the streets of Paris, and I fear that I might lose my way."

"You might take a cab—that would be the safer course at this hour of the night," urged Justin.

"No, no; my friend impressed upon me that I ought to go on foot. It seems that the people who keep this place mistrust vehicles."

"Because detectives can hide in them," muttered Justin, who had just turned to watch the movements of a band of grotesque masqueraders in the auditorium below the box.

There were half a dozen of them, so "got up" as to personate a marriage-party in some provincial village. The bridegroom wore a cotton night-cap, in the Norman fashion; the bride was in short skirts; there was a village mayor with a wonderful old beaver hat; a fantastic rural guard; and, in addition, a kind of troubadour with a plumed cap and a cardboard mandolin. The party was passing below the boxes giving vent to savage shouts, and now and then it stopped to exchange coarse jests or virulent abuse with some of the lookers-on. All the members of the party belonged to the sterner sex; the bride being personated by a thick-set fellow with hairy arms, gloved half way up to the elbow, and with crooked legs in dirty tights. His broad shoulders would have done honour to one of the "strong men," as the Paris market porters are called, and peculiar as was his build, he was evidently possessed of great muscular strength. All that could be seen of his face was his large mouth and ill-shaven chin. For, above, he wore a peculiar mask with a turn-up nose, glowing cheeks and shaggy eyebrows; while, on either side of the wreath of orange blossom which encircled his pate, there up-rose a monstrous ear, almost asinine in form.

Justin did not admire this scamp's disguise, but he fancied he could recognise his voice, a cracked, cavernous voice, suggestive of the professional loafer, and he said to himself: "Unless I am greatly mistaken this is one of the fellows with whom my Canadian friend boxed on the Boulevard Montmartre. The

troubadour with the tow wig, must be the other one. They saw the hundred thousand francs which Laramie displayed at the commissary's, and they followed him, that's certain. And what's more, is that they recognise him now, for they are looking up, and making an awful row just below us. They mean to remain in front of the box till Laramie goes off. I sha'n't let him run about the streets on foot. That gambling house must be in some secluded neighbourhood where they would all of them fall upon my Canadian, rifle his pockets and perhaps murder him into the bargain. In that case I should miss making my fortune, but no, no, I won't allow it."

"Those fellows shouting down there look like perfect black-guards," now said M. Laramie. "The noise they make is positively deafening. Let us be off. If you won't accompany me, I shall go alone. I shall only have to ask the way of the passers-by I may meet."

"Where is the house situated?" asked Justin, who wished to gain time.

"It is No. 49 Rue Mogador."

"Rue Mogador! then it is only a couple of yards off, behind the theatre. That alters the case entirely. On the nights when there is a masquerade ball at the opera house, there are as many people in that direction as there are in the day-time. All the cafés at the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann remain open."

"Then you feel more at ease and you won't desert me?" asked Laramie.

"No, I won't—especially if you will grant me a few minutes' delay."

"All right. We will wait till that party of roughs has moved on."

Justin made no rejoinder. He was reflecting as follows: "I wonder whether they will stop under Monsieur de Bolgos's box. Yes, they are going there now. And the bride is executing a fancy dance in the count's honour; while the troubadour holds out his cap as if for alms! Ah! Monsieur de Bolgos has thrown him a five franc piece wrapped in paper! Now I know what to think—they belong to the band. I wasn't acquainted with them before, but I can't know all the roughs who work for him. The one I saw in the gallery at the Variétés must belong to this party—he's no doubt the one distinguished as a 'rural guard.' Yes, that's it. He must have been told by the other two that there was an American walking about Paris with a hundred thousand francs in his pocket. The count must be already informed on the point; we shall be followed and my false nose is hardly a sufficient disguise. It is best to go off before they have had time to concert with Bolgos, but perhaps the order has already been given; three words, scrawled on the paper in which the five-franc piece, just thrown to them, was wrapped, that would be enough."

"Oh! really, I have seen quite enough of it," now exclaimed M. Francis, "I'm going. Will you come?"

"Yes, yes, let us go off, and not tarry in the passage," rejoined Justin, hastily opening the box door.

The Canadian donned his wonderful hat and passed out the first, forcing his way through the crowd just as a powerful vessel cuts athwart the waves. This transatlantic giant cared very little whether he hustled the groups of bystanders; he let the discontented people complain and growl, and went on, steadily elbowing his way towards the exit. However, when near the grand staircase, there was such a sudden and violent crush that Laramie was pushed back upon Justin who was following in his wake; and the shock was so severe that the valet's false nose fell off. As an additional piece of ill-luck, this untimely accident befell him just as M. Valbourg and the Count de Bolgos, who had left their box, were trying to cross the passage to reach the lounge.

To have been outside the building at that moment Justin would have willingly given one of the thousand franc notes which the Canadian had so generously handed him; for M. de Bolgos and M. Valbourg had both recognised him and were looking at him in a deriding fashion. He certainly tried to stoop so as to pick up his false nose, but some people had already trodden upon it, and his effort was of no avail, for as he drew himself up again he distinctly heard the Count say to his companion: "I'm not mistaken. That's your valet, my dear fellow—Monsieur Justin comes to the opera ball just as you and I do. The scamp doesn't deprive himself of anything. I begin to fancy that I made you a sorry present, and if I were in your place I should dismiss him."

"I shall probably do so to-morrow," replied Valbourg.

Thereupon he and Bolgos made their way through the throng, and Justin did not venture to follow them to apologise for the great liberty he had taken in coming to the ball in evening dress, just like his master. The mishap had greatly mortified him and he realised that his only remaining chance was to cling to Laramie.

Still he did not wish to take French leave of M. Valbourg. He was not yet an honest man but he was becoming one, and he was anxious to explain his conduct to his master who had forgiven him for his attempted robbery, and to beg of him to let him go and get hanged on the other side of the Atlantic—if indeed hanging was his destiny. He foresaw that the interview would be a stormy one, still he did not despair of securing a full amnesty. Whatever might be M. Valbourg's designs as regards the Count de Bolgos, he could have no particular motive for showing himself pitiless as regards an unlucky fellow who sincerely repented of his conduct, and who wished to make all the reparation in his power, notably by revealing M. de Bolgos's new schemes.

"I will tell Monsieur Valbourg all that I have seen this night," thought Justin. "He shall know that the whole gang is afoot, that their commander has been denounced, that the police will set hands upon him one of these fine days, and that my evidence won't be requisite to secure his conviction. My master ought not to have

anything more to do with that Galician nobleman ; I shall tell him so, and in exchange for my information and advice, he will surely give me my liberty."

Whilst Justin was thus consoling himself for his misadventure, Laramie was proceeding onward, and the grand staircase was now near at hand. There was rather more space, and the Canadian was again about to put on his hat, which he had taken off on account of the great heat, when a woman, wearing a domino, suddenly passed her arm under his. Although Laramie was slightly astonished by her familiar way of proceeding, he allowed her to lead him to a corner near the lounge ; and Justin, albeit greatly annoyed by this fresh incident, did not dare to remind his new friend that the gambling in the Rue Mogador must now be at its height, and that he was perhaps missing a favourable opportunity for coining a large sum of money. He contented himself with following discreetly, at the same time scrutinizing the damsel who had thus taken possession of the rich foreigner, whom, he, Justin, so particularly wished to monopolize.

This audacious young person was of medium height, and plump, at least so far as one could judge by the domino she wore ; a hired domino, by the way, quite destitute of elegance. Instead of her face being hidden by thick black lace as is nowadays the fashion, she wore, under her hood, a black velvet mask fringed with tulle which concealed her chin. A creature rigged out in this style could not possibly have any standing, and Justin felt more at ease as to the possible result of this ill-timed meeting. "I was afraid that she might confiscate Laramie," he said to himself, "but there is no fear of that. She probably wants to borrow a franc or two so as to get her mantle back at the cloak-room."

However, as he scrutinized the damsel still more closely, he espied beneath her domino, which was rather short, a green satin shoe and a strip of pink silk stocking, embroidered at the side, and he fancied that he had seen that shoe and that stocking somewhere before. It then occurred to him that this person had draped herself in a hired domino to conceal some fancy costume, and as his mind was given to surmises, he asked himself if his Canadian friend had not fallen into the clutches of some feminine emissary dispatched on a reconnoitring expedition by Bolgos's hirelings. She had probably just left the auditorium and could not be prowling about the passage without a motive.

However, Justin's astonishment was not yet at an end.

"Good-evening, Prince of California," said the damsel to Laramie, speaking in a shrill voice which did not seem quite natural to the valet. "Are the gold mines out there still getting on all right ? And how was the voyage ? Not a bad one, eh ? You are never seasick surely."

"How do you know that I have just come from America ?" asked Laramie in astonishment.

"Oh ! that can be seen, my big fellow. Frenchmen are not built like you are, and more's the pity, for you are really a handsome man."

"If that is all you have got to tell me—"

"You will say good-night? But I haven't finished, for I know you and I know why you have come to Paris—"

"You must be a sorceress then."

"So I am—a sorceress in every way, and a dealer in information at moderate prices. How much will you give me if I bring you the woman you are in search of?"

Laramie, now fairly stupefied, released his arm, and began to look attentively at this person who seemed to be so well informed. "Oh you may look!" said she. "You won't recognise me for you never saw me before. Come, don't play the simpleton. I have guessed your troubles, my dear fellow, and I am willing to make you happy. Only I don't work for nothing. Just state your terms. Would you give fifty thousand francs to see her again?"

"Fifty thousand francs," repeated M. Laramie mechanically; he was becoming more and more bewildered.

"It's worth more than that for a rich fellow like you, but I am not exacting," resumed the woman. "I'll bet that you have already been asked more."

"Fifty thousand dollars, yes; only—"

"How much would that make? Ah! I know—a dollar is worth five francs. All right, your highness, those terms will suit me nicely and before a fortnight I'll bring you your darling, providing that you will only tell me where she perched before she hopped the twig."

"I don't understand—"

"Ah! that's true. I forgot that you were a foreigner. But what I want to know is, her last address—the place where you called on your arrival here. Come, you can surely tell me—what do you risk? it won't compromise her. We say then that she was living in the Rue—"

"Rue du Rocher, at No. 99."

"What! really?" exclaimed the woman, who, in her turn, now seemed greatly surprised.

Justin, who had heard every word of this conversation, had had his suspicions aroused at the outset; and he now knew what to think, for the woman in giving vent to her last exclamation had unwittingly spoken in her natural voice. The domino and the mask hid the shoulders and the face of the valet's sweetheart, Mariette.

On her side, she realised that her lover had recognised her, for, without taking any further trouble to disguise her voice, she resumed: "Well, really, my Californian prince, you *are* a lucky fellow, for the thing is as good as done. On the day after to-morrow I will call at the Grand Hotel and you shall sign a paper promising me the sum you mentioned, on the day that I bring you face to face with your beauty. Please notice that I don't ask you for her name, nor for your own either. I shall find you both without that. I'm not a sorceress for nothing. And now that's enough talk. You are going to supper, no doubt, with that gentleman there? You might per-

haps have found a better companion ; however, I won't detain you. Amuse yourselves, both of you ; I sha'n't cry, you may be sure of that."

Justin looked rather foolish, and he could not think of any better course than to take M. Laramie's arm and lead him away. The Canadian offered no resistance and Mariette let them pass on ; only she followed them, and while they were going down the grand staircase, she profited by the fact that the crush momentarily parted her lover from his companion to whisper in the former's ear : "That will teach you, my fine fellow, not to play me any such tricks again. Ah ! you wanted to pluck the pigeon without my help, did you ? And you leave me in the lurch to go and amuse yourself with him. A fine lot of cray-fish I should have had if I had waited for you near the orchestra as was agreed. But I kept my eye on you. I recognised the American in the box—I could tell that he was an American by his mere appearance—and I managed to catch him on the wing in the passage. I had to pay seven francs for the hire of a domino, but it will cost you dearer than it will cost me. I shall pocket the reward and you won't have a copper of it. Oh ! you can go to the Rue du Rocher, if you like—it will exercise your legs, that's all. But with me it's different. I know what I know—I shall manage to have some supper to-night without you—and if you don't like it, why you may lump it."

Justin did not hear the finish of Mariette's discourse. Laramie had turned round to see if he was at hand, and the valet hastened on while the maid gave up the pursuit.

"That was a singular adventure !" exclaimed the Canadian, "how can that woman have guessed my object in coming to Paris ?"

"Perhaps you mentioned your plans to your American friend—the one who gave you the address of the gambling-house," said Justin. "That woman may have become acquainted with him at some public ball—and then have seen you walking about the boulevard with him. On meeting him again she may have questioned him about you, and he may have been over talkative."

"Yes, perhaps it was as you say. I did wrong to take my friend so fully into my confidence, and perhaps I have done wrong in giving a perfect stranger the address of the house where the person I am in search of, resided."

"Yes, I think it would have been better if you had not given her that information," replied Justin, "she might abuse it."

"I ought not to have answered her at all," muttered the Canadian, "but I was so taken by surprise—so little prepared to be questioned about my affairs by a young person of that class, that I lost my self-possession. Still I would certainly give her the reward if she only found the person I am looking for. Strange to say, as soon as I had mentioned the Rue du Rocher, she seemed certain of success."

"Oh ! to my mind it was all so much acting," retorted Justin. "You yourself went to the Rue du Rocher and yet you failed to

find out anything. She won't be any more successful than you were."

"I am afraid she won't," sighed the Canadian, "However, perhaps you will be more fortunate as you have promised to make a search on your own side."

"I will do my best," replied the valet modestly.

In point of fact he was really uneasy in mind. Mariette's exclamation had furnished him with abundant food for reflection. He knew that she was a shrewd girl, and he suspected that she had some friend in a position to give her information respecting the departed tenant. "I did wrong to vex her," he reflected. "By finding that woman she may, in a degree, certainly cut the grass from under my feet; still she won't deprive me of Monsieur Laramie's protection, for I hold him and don't mean to let go of him."

They were now at the foot of the staircase and the vestibule was already full of people on the point of going either to supper or to bed. The "village wedding" party was already there, and there was reason to be surprised thereat, as masqueraders of this description don't usually leave the ball before the finish. However, since Justin had observed the manœuvres of these fellows below the boxes, he was not astonished to meet them again. "I was right," he thought, "they have orders to keep an eye on my American, and we shall be followed. The question is whether they will dare to attack us. I don't think so. There are so many people about, and the Rue Mogador is so near. All the same, it would be much better if I could prevail on Laramie to go straight to the Grand Hotel."

"Well, my dear fellow," now said the Canadian. "I am waiting, you know that you promised to escort me."

"Home?" said Justin at a venture.

"No, to the gaming-house. I more than ever need a little forgetfulness. That girl in the domino increased my worries by her talk and her promises. And I shall expect that you will come into the house with me. You have no excuse for refusing, as you are fond of play: you admitted as much to me."

"It depends upon what kind of play it is," replied Justin. "I detest lansquenet and baccarat, especially when the bank is held by a person I don't know."

"Oh! roulette is the only game played at the house where we are going."

"Roulette!" exclaimed Justin in a tremor. Roulette was his great passion. This ravenous game which intoxicates and ruins had cost him his patrimony and his honour. Since the disasters which had befallen him at Monte Carlo, he had never had an opportunity of seeing a ball dart round a cylinder. He dreamt of it at night-time; and Laramie's offer to revive, that evening, all his emotions of yore, cost him a severe trial. He would certainly have declined to take part in a game of cards, but the idea of trying to spot lucky numbers, once more, fairly turned his head.

"Yes, roulette," resumed the Canadian. "It is the most amusing game in the world."

"You have already played at it, then?" asked Justin hastily. He was already forgetting his scruples and the danger of losing his money. Gamblers forget everything when play is spoken of.

"Yes, very often, but not in Europe as this is my first trip on this side of the Atlantic," replied Laramie.

"Then it is known in America?"

"In all the large towns and even at the mines, where, by the way, a man has the right to stake nuggets."

"Then how is he paid when he wins on any one number for instance?"

"The nugget is weighed and you receive twenty-three times its value."

"Why twenty-three and not thirty-five?"

"Because there are only twenty-four numbers on the American roulette-table," replied the American.

"Oh, indeed! And how many zeros are there?" asked Justin.

"Two, without counting the American eagle, which is for the croupier. When that turns up the bank rakes in everything."

"Oh! oh! I see that the croupiers of the new world understand business. Three zeros so to say, for them, and only twenty-four numbers on the table. Why, that is deliberate robbery."

"Why so?" asked Monsieur Laramie. "Isn't it easier to spot one number out of twenty-four, than one number out of thirty-six."

Justin did not insist. He was edified as to the ability of his wealthy friend as a gamester. Monsieur Laramie might be a daring gold-hunter, and an engineer of exceptional merit, but so far as play was concerned, he was a most pitiable mathematician. However, the valet now inquired if the roulette-table at the house in the Rue Mogador was one after the American pattern.

"I don't think so," replied the Canadian. "My friend told me that the game was played there in just the same way as at Monaco."

"Ah! that's proper," rejoined Justin. "A man can fight against a single zero."

"Then you have no further objections to offer, and we will finish the night together, eh? Don't be worried if you lose. In fact, if you like, you can already consider the few notes I gave you as lost. I shall be there to replace them. It is only natural that I should give you a helping hand, since you are simply coming to oblige me. You shall give me some advice as to staking my money."

These gracious remarks swept Justin's lingering hesitation away. Besides, he had now gone too far to retreat, and he had already burnt his ships in one direction. He must at present needs follow his fate.

Whilst chatting, the Canadian and the valet had descended the

steps of the opera house, and had turned to the left up the Rue Halévy. This was the shortest route to the Rue Mogador, for after passing along the Rue Gluck, there would only be the Boulevard Haussmann to cross. Justin had again tried to persuade Monsieur Laramie to take a cab, but had failed in the attempt. The rule was to go to the placeon foot and the Canadian wished to abide by it. Besides, the streets were well lighted, and the scene was as animated as during the daytime. The horses of the Gardes de Paris, on duty outside the opera house, were pawing and prancing; stylish carriages rolled along; the resplendent cafés were full of customers; merry-making passers-by gave vent to carnivalesque shouts; and parties of policemen patrolled the side walks so that there might not be any positive breach of propriety. An attack, or even a mere dispute, would have brought a hundred spectators together at once.

And yet the "village wedding" party was following Laramie and Justin—but at a respectful distance. The valet, who frequently turned round, saw that they did not evince any inclination to draw nearer. From time to time indeed, they even stopped to kick up their heels on the side-walk to the great delight of belated roysterers. However, their choreographic performances were never of long duration. They soon started off again, and made up, by running, for the ground they lost by halting to dance.

"I think I understand the situation," thought Justin. "They have received orders to find out where the American is going; but they won't fall upon us in this neighbourhood, and we have nothing to fear for the time being. Still they might wait for us at the door of the house. It isn't daylight before seven o'clock, and at five there will be no one about. The question is whether the game will last till dawn."

"It seems to me that here we are," now said Laramie, pointing to the name of the Rue Mogador inscribed in white letters upon a blue ground at the corner of a street they reached after crossing the Boulevard Haussmann.

"Yes, but the numbers begin in this direction," muttered Justin, "and No 49, where we are bound, must be at the farther end."

The critical moment had now arrived. This street was somewhat dark; and as it does not lead anywhere, it is but little frequented even in the daytime. However, it is of no great length, and the cafés on the Boulevard Haussmann, from which it starts, were still open. There was even a wine shop at one corner, and the "village wedding" party darted into it without seeming to pay any attention to the two gentlemen ahead.

"Have I been mistaken?" thought Justin. "At all events we don't risk anything. There are already twenty customers in front of the bar there; and if we were attacked we should only have to raise a shout, for help to be forthcoming at once."

M. Laramie, who was quite unconscious of any danger, went on with measured steps, looking at the numbers of the houses: "It is

here," he said at last, stopping short in front of a small building of somewhat modest appearance.

There was only a carriage entrance on the ground floor, and but one window to the single storey above. No light was visible, and the inmates of the place were probably asleep, unless, indeed, there was another building behind the one which bordered the street.

"Shall I ring?" asked Justin, who no longer had any thought of holding back. "No doubt one has to announce oneself in some special way, and if you will kindly tell me—"

"Let us see where the bull's eye is, to begin with," replied M. Laramie, examining the wall.

"The bull's eye? What's that?" asked Justin.

By way of reply, M. Laramie, who had stooped, so that he was almost able to touch the pavement, showed him a round hole in the wall—an aperture closed by a convex glass, not unlike that of a telescope.

"What! is *that* the way in?" jeeringly asked the valet, who had fully recovered his spirits now that he no longer feared being attacked by the suspicious masqueraders.

"You shall see," replied the Canadian, in a whisper; and, thereupon, with the tips of his fingers, he tapped three times, at carefully calculated intervals, upon the convex glass.

Almost immediately afterwards, a sharp click was heard; this peculiar little window had opened, to all appearance, automatically. M. Laramie then quietly drew his note-case from his pocket, took out ten bank-notes, of a thousand francs each, together with a triangular card, and folded them all into a little parcel which he slipped into the aperture, just as if he had been dropping something into a letter box.

"What are you about, sir?" asked Justin, who was fairly stupefied.

"I told you that certain rules must be observed in order to secure admission."

"Yes, but slipping ten thousand francs into a hole seems to me to be a strange rule. A good many people would not be able to follow it."

"Oh! I might have slipped a much smaller sum into the bull's eye," replied the Canadian. "The minimum is one thousand francs."

"The deuce it is! Well, for a minimum it is very high. Fifty louis merely for admission, I never heard of such a thing!" protested Justin.

"Oh! the fifty louis are not lost."

"Are they returned then when you come out?"

"Better than that. You find them on the gaming table—at the seat intended for you. They reserve it, as it were."

"Dear me! It's a clever trick, I must say. But everyone couldn't conform to it."

"That is the very reason why it was devised," resumed the Cana-

dian. "Any outsider who had purloined or found a ticket of admission could not avail himself of it unless he had a thousand francs about him. The vidame* only receives people of means and he is quite right."

"The vidame?"

"Yes, that's his title. The master of the house is named the Vidame de Sartilly."

"I thought there were no vidames left," muttered Justin.

"It seems there are some. My American friend was introduced to this one by a well known nobleman, who informed him that Monsieur de Sartilly's lineage was extremely ancient and aristocratic."

"Well, I must say that he doesn't seem very proud of his birth. If the police discovered this gambling den, the vidame would be accommodated with a seat in the dock."

"Your laws are absurd. In a free country every one does as he likes. The right to gamble is one of the rights of man. However, what you say will never befall the master of this house."

"The fact is that he takes very great precautions—indeed, almost childish ones. There are more formalities about getting into this place than there are about a freemasons' reception. I now understand why the vidame requires his customers to come on foot. If a cabman witnessed the preliminary operations outside, he would imagine that the place was full of conspirators and go and make a report at the Prefecture of Police at once. However, these people don't seem to be in a hurry to answer you."

"They need the time to verify my invitation ticket. My American friend told me that it would take a few minutes."

"And after that?" asked Justin.

"Why, after that the door will be opened—and see, it is opening now."

The door had indeed just been opened by some invisible means. No one was to be seen and not a sound had been heard.

"Let us go in," said M. Laramie.

Justin made no objection but followed his companion. He had at first felt very anxious. He had asked himself whether the American's pocket-book would not be emptied by some other means than gambling, and whether this mysterious house was not simply a den of thieves. However, he now considered that he knew the reason of all these preliminary precautions. To his mind they had been devised in view of acting upon the imagination of the simple-minded foreigners, invited to these nocturnal roulette parties. Moreover, he was not sorry to have a chance of becoming acquainted, gratis, with this hospitable vidame, who so graciously opened his drawing-room doors to wealthy patrons of the noble game of roulette.

* Vidame was an old feudal title in France, belonging to noblemen who held land in fief of a bishop on condition of defending his temporal sway. At the present date the title is extinct, though one or two aged noblemen still claimed it some years ago. M. du Boisgobey has perhaps stretched a point in presenting us with a vidame in 1882, when the incidents described in the present story are supposed to take place.—Trans.

They had scarcely crossed the threshold when the door closed behind them, probably by means of some ingenious mechanism, for they still saw no signs of any house-porter. It is true that it was not particularly light in the vestibule in which they found themselves, and at the end of which there shone a solitary lamp perched on a white marble pedestal. They walked towards this lamp, and just then a footman in a gorgeous livery stepped out of a corner and politely requested them to let him take charge of their hats and overcoats. Matters were managed in this style at the *Frascati* rooms in former times, and it was evident that the vidame conformed to the traditions of the grand old days when the farmers general of public gambling traded upon the public at the corner of the Boulevard Montmartre and the Rue de Richelieu. The coats and hats having been duly handed to the footman, the latter opened a side door and showed the visitors a brilliantly lighted staircase.

"Well, what do you think of it all?" asked the Canadian as he set his feet on the first step. "It seems to me that Monsieur de Sartilly's residence is not a den."

"I never expected to see anything of the kind," muttered Justin. "One would think oneself in a palace. Roulette never had a better lodging than this."

"The fact is, there is far less luxury in America," remarked Laramie.

"And more zeros," said the valet sarcastically.

"I am also willing to bet that the vidame is not at all like the fellows who keep roulette tables in the States," added the Canadian. "Out there they are called tigers, and the name isn't a bad one, for they pitilessly devour unlucky gamesters."

"Whereas the vidame no doubt behaves politely, still he devours the unlucky ones all the same," retorted Justin in the same sarcastic strain.

"Remember, however, that my American friend won money here," said Laramie, "besides you won't be obliged to play. I will introduce you as a friend of mine—I have a right to bring one—and if you like I will say that you have merely come to oblige me, and that you don't care for play."

"That's useless," stammered Justin, "I will do like every one else, only I shall be prudent."

In the depths of his heart he was longing to try his luck and eager to seat himself at table. Still, he was also anxious to know in what kind of society he was about to find himself, and to what category of croupiers the noble master of the house belonged.

Monsieur de Sartilly was awaiting his guests at the top of the stairs, on a landing adorned with rare flowering plants, and he was not at all what Justin had pictured him to be. He was, in fact, a tall old man with remarkably polished manners; dry, slim and muscular, standing well upon his legs, and with something of the old régime about his air. He had no doubt served in the body guard of King Charles X. He was faultlessly attired, but did not

display a single order, although he was no doubt, at least, a Knight of St. Louis. He had the simple, easy demeanour of a nobleman receiving a few of his equals: and there was nothing whatever of the professional croupier or Captain Rook about him.

"You are welcome, gentlemen," he said courteously, but without departing from his dignified attitude. "Your visit was announced to me by Mr. Meredith Disney of Baltimore, who often did me the honour to spend his evenings here during his stay in Paris. Before leaving he told me that he should send me two of his compatriots—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Francis Laramie, "I am not a citizen of the United States—I come from Canada."

"It is almost the same thing," replied the vidame smiling.

"And my friend is a Parisian," added Justin's protector.

"Ah! that gentleman is French! He will perhaps find himself rather lonely here, as he will only meet foreigners. However, it is sufficient that you introduce him to me, to ensure him a cordial reception."

The tone in which these final remarks were made confirmed Justin's anticipations. Monsieur do Sartilly preferentially sought the society of foreign gamesters, and he did not look upon Frenchmen with a very favourable eye. He, no doubt, had a poor opinion of their discretion.

"As it happens," now resumed the vidame, "there are not many of us here this evening. We have three Brazilians, two Russians, and a Roumanian, who all of them met Monsieur Disney here, and who will be delighted to become acquainted with two of his friends. Your seats are reserved for you, gentlemen, and the game is in full progress. By the way, too, you arrive at the right time for the bank is losing heavily, and if you only win half as much as Monsieur Disney did, it will be almost broken. One of my relatives, a lady, undertook to hold the bank this evening, but she does not seem to be lucky."

"A lady relative indeed! So there are women here," thought Justin. "Ah! the vidame has fallen a peg lower in my esteem. I was about to take him for a real gentleman, but it seems as though I were mistaken. So much the better, I should have felt ill at ease if I had really had to deal with people of good society."

"I must tell you, gentlemen, why we play roulette here," now resumed the vidame with an easy air. "I am very fond of the game but there are certain prejudices against it, as you are well aware. It is forbidden at clubs in Paris, and as a rule people don't dare to indulge in it, in their drawing-rooms. I therefore thought of bringing a few people, with the same tastes as myself, together, once or twice a week. I am of course compelled to take some precautions, but the annoyance they occasion me is amply compensated for by the pleasure I feel in finding myself in agreeable company. You will pray do me the honour to believe that I don't speculate on the play. The banker has an advantage at roulette,

as you must know, and, here, every one can take the bank in turn. It is generally left to me, but I infinitely prefer playing against another person's bank, and my cousin, the Baroness de Soumans, is not at all anxious to confine herself to working the cylinder, for she is even more of a gamester than I am."

"Ah! ah!" reflected Justin, "that baroness must be another counterfeit aristocrat, just like this Vidame de Sartilly."

The name of Soumans was quite unknown to the valet. Mariette had often spoken to him about a baroness who took an interest in her, but she had never told him where this baroness lived, or what her name was, and as a matter of course he had never seen her.

"As for you, Mr. Vidame," he reflected, "you ought to keep all this humbug for your Roumanians. I now understand why you only invite foreigners. You know very well that Frenchmen are too shrewd to swallow your stories. As for everybody's right to hold the bank I know all about that—all the people who keep clandestine gambling-houses try the same dodge, and it doesn't cost them much. They know very well that the true pleasure of a gamester is to collect his money together, to try to get on a series, and to guess the winning numbers. All the same, however, I feel curious to see this baroness—she's a fine woman, I'll be bound."

Monsieur Laramie, on his side, had not attached much importance to the vidame's preamble, and he was not at all affected by the announcement that a baroness was working the cylinder.

"Come, gentlemen," now resumed Monsieur de Sartilly, "you will excuse me for not interrupting the game to introduce you to my other visitors. People don't like to be disturbed at play."

Justin, who knew that this last remark was quite true, smiled, and followed his Canadian friend, whom the vidame preceded along a gallery which was as brilliantly lighted up as if a ball were to be given there. The further one advanced into this house with the dark frontage, the brighter the illuminations became.

"Here is the temple of the Goddess Fortune," said Monsieur de Sartilly, pointing to a doorway screened by Japanese hangings. "I presume that it is not necessary to recommend you to remain silent. The slightest noise would disturb the worshippers. The only sound that one likes to hear here is that of the ivory ball revolving round the polished brass cylinder. However, talking isn't altogether forbidden—people can speak in whispers."

The temple proved to be a circular saloon, extremely lofty, and decorated with gilded panels in the First Empire style. Some army purveyor, enriched by robbing the soldiers of the Republic, had, no doubt, built himself this lordly pleasure house with the intention of aping the aristocrats of the old régime. There were mirrors in every direction, and some windows which overlooked a garden enclosed by very high walls. There was thus no fear of prying neighbours; you were as safe and as secluded there as in a cellar; though on the other hand the apartment was far more

comfortable than the basements of the Palais Royal, where the public gambling dens were located in the days of the Directory.

In the middle of the saloon, beneath a chandelier which was one blaze of light, there stood a long table, at which sat the baroness officiating. Nothing was wanting ; the cylinder was there duly fitted into the table, and there were the two "tableaux" with their gilt divisions and numbers, shining upon the green baize, together with several ivory rakes with ebony handles—in fact all the appurtenances of a *bona-fide* roulette table organised upon a more luxurious scale than at Monte Carlo.

However no gold was to be seen. Louis were represented by counters. The thousand-franc notes, which constituted the bank's capital, were piled one above the other in a box with a glass lid, and, as the players mainly attacked heavily upon single chances, it was seldom that any necessity arose for giving change.

There were in all some ten assailants attacking the vidame's capital. They were all of them foreigners as could easily be seen, and they were all absorbed in their play. None of them as much as raised their eyes to glance at the new comers, whom the Baroness de Soumans favoured, however, with an almost familiar nod.

The majestic Clorinde was in her element. She seemed to have been specially sent upon earth to preside over a gathering of the worshippers of Luck, and some fortunate change must have taken place in her position, for she was now clad like a queen, a sexagenarian queen, be it understood, for money lacks the power to rejuvenate those who possess it. She, who erst while, in her tiny rooms in the Rue du Rocher, had habitually worn a flannel dressing gown, was now arrayed in a stylish robe of moiro antique, and adorned with costly jewellery. As she was not deficient in what is vulgarly called "gumption," she slightly frowned on catching sight of Justin, who did not look like either a nabob or a boyard, though he might have passed muster as a gentleman. The fact that his face was clean shaven disturbed the baroness, and she said to herself : "That young fellow is certainly neither a sailor, nor a man of the law. How does it happen, then, that he is shaven like a lackey ?"

As for M. Laramie, she had taken his measurement at the first glance ; and her opinion of him was substantially correct, although she was of course unable to guess that he was a Canadian, just like her young friend Mademoiselle Marguerite de Cambremer.

The vidame silently conducted the new comers to the seats which had been reserved for them, and which were duly marked by the bank-notes which Francis had slipped into the bull's eye. Two equal packets had been made of these notes, the rule being that each player, on taking his seat, should find on the table before him, the sum which he had sent in like a visiting card by means of the invisible air tube. When two persons came together with a single admission ticket, it was always presumed

that the funds despatched in advance belonged half to one and half to the other, and so the amount was equally divided.

Owing to this arrangement, Justin, who had not slipped anything into the fantastic letter-box, found himself in possession of an additional sum of five thousand francs, and he could thus try his luck without drawing upon the notes, for which he had previously been indebted to his protector's generosity. This windfall stifled all his ideas of prudence, and he now only thought of turning the money, which had come to him so unexpectedly, to good account.

He was seated on the baroness's left hand, occupying a chair which some "broken" gamester had no doubt abandoned. M. Laramie, seated near the vidame, on the other side of the table, was in front of Justin, just as M. de Sartilly found himself in front of Madame de Soumans. The master of the house, having been apprized that two new players had arrived, had gone to receive them, but he now prepared to assist his noble relative, who could not do everything herself. Clorinde worked the cylinder, and the vidame raked in the spoils.

The Canadian who had already laid the remainder of his hundred thousand francs "pocket money" on the table, began by staking a hundred louis on the red. Justin, who was more modest, asked to have one of his notes changed, and received a number of counters from Madame de Soumans who was stealthily watching him.

"This is, perhaps, the first time that you have ever seen a roulette table?" said she in an undertone.

"In Paris, yes, madame," replied Justin, speaking in the same key.

"Then you have already played somewhere before?" rejoined the baroness; and then raising her voice she called out: "Seven—red—odd—and miss."

"Ah! the rascal, there he is again!" growled Justin.

"Whom are you angry with?" inquired Madame de Soumans.

"With number seven. That number is my nightmare."

"Why so?" asked Clorinde in a tone of interest.

"Because it is placed between twenty-eight and thirty-three in the cylinder."

"Well, what of that?"

"Well, as I always stake on the double transversal from twenty-eight to thirty-three, I take an assurance on the seven, and when I do so it never turns up."

"Assurances are not worth anything; they are like half-way measures in business," said Madame de Soumans. "All or nothing, that is my motto. Come, gentlemen, make your game. Be attentive, my dear vidame, you are forgetting to pay your neighbour." Then lowering her voice once more, the baroness said to Justin: "And so, sir, you have patronised Monte Carlo?"

"A deal too much," responded the valet drily.

"Well you will recoup yourself here. The bank isn't in luck

to-night. But I am astonished that I never saw you at Monaco. I often go there."

"Oh ! I haven't been there for the last three years," said Justin.

"Twenty-nine—black—odd—and pass," now proclaimed the baroness. "Ah ! ah ! You attacked your transversal with five louis," she added, speaking to Justin, "and you were successful, I see. You have thirty louis on, at present. Do you mean to leave them ?"

"Yes, till the third term inclusively."

"That's right ! You are a player, I see. A real one. All those savages of both hemispheres play anyhow : not one of them knows anything of the science of the game."

"Perhaps that is the reason why they win."

"Oh ! they don't win always. Just look, your friend has lost the four thousand francs he had staked on the red, and he is now staking three thousand on the same colour. It's very fine, no doubt, but very stupid. He will learn to his cost that a player ought not to be obstinate. There, I was sure of it," added Madame de Sounans, and again she proclaimed aloud : "Thirty-one—black—odd—and pass !"

A moment later, she once more resumed, speaking in an undertone to Justin, "There are a hundred and fifty louis for you, my dear sir. With your stakes that will make a hundred and eighty. You can only have a hundred on. Our maximum is ten thousand francs."

"All right, I stake a hundred louis."

"Very good. You have plenty of nerve I see. And your friend as well. He is staking the maximum on the red. If he came across a series we should not hold out for long. He is wealthy, I suppose ?"

"Oh ! very wealthy."

"So much the better for him, for he does not strike me as being lucky. He is an American, I suppose. Only a Yankee could wear such a formidable looking beard."

"He is a Canadian, madame."

"A Canadian !" repeated Clorinde. "Dear me, that's strange. Does he live in Paris ?"

"No, madame," was Justin's reply, "he arrived here quite recently, and this is his first visit to Europe."

"That can be seen," rejoined Clorinde, making the ball spin round the cylinder in a style which would have done honour to a professional croupier. However, her thoughts were now less with the game than with the new-comer who was seated beside her relative, the vidame. A word from her neighbour, Justin, had attracted her attention to the transatlantic tourist.

"So you have only recently made his acquaintance ?" said she, turning once more to the valet.

"Yes—that is to say I—I don't know," stammered Justin, who was beginning to feel annoyed by the baroness's questions. He

had a hundred louis staked, and was watching the evolutions of the ball with feverish attention.

"How is it that you don't know?" grumbled Madame de Soumans.

"Five louis on zero!" rejoined Justin, pushing five counters forward.

A second later and the ball stopped at zero.

"You are really much luckier than your friend, sir," said the baroness. "You have lost a hundred louis on your transversal, but you win a hundred and seventy-five by staking on the zero."

"Yes, I had a lucky inspiration—and I believe that that zero was a warning. I shall change my system—twelve louis on number twenty, just to try; after that I'll see."

The baroness realised that she would not be able to elicit any further information, at present, from this gamester who was absorbed in his play. Besides, perfect silence ought to prevail at roulette, and the vidame was making signs to his relative to request her not to chat even in an undertone. Madame de Soumans accordingly held her tongue; still she decided that she would not let the young fellow, who had no beard, go off, without obtaining from him some information about the young fellow who had one.

Number twenty now won, and Justin triumphantly raked in eight one-thousand franc notes, plus twenty counters representing a louis each, which Monsieur de Sartilly paid out with infinite grace. The master of the house had no reason to be disconsolate, for number twenty is black, and the Canadian who was still obstinately staking on red, had lost ten thousand francs, while the other players also lost less important sums on various numbers. Luck was decidedly setting in against Laramie, who took matters easily, and in favour of Justin, whose delight was intense. His happiness indeed intoxicated him to such a degree that he was no longer conscious of what was going on around, and he certainly would not have heard his neighbour had she taken it into her head to speak to him again.

However, Clorinde had renounced questioning him for the time being. She was busy with her ball and cylinder, and devoted her brief moments of leisure to scrutinizing the bearded stranger from Canada. Despite her enhanced position and her present share in the bank of her old friend the vidame, she did not lose sight of the interests of Madame Mireille. She was by no means ungrateful, and she remembered that Fernande had confided to her the management of the funds advanced to bring out Marguerite de Cambremer. The young widow's confidence had placed at her disposal a considerable sum which she was endeavouring to turn to good account. She had become Monsieur de Sartilly's partner, and was on the way to make a large fortune; for this noble croupier kept an establishment which was unique in Paris, albeit that gambling houses abound there, an establishment which had nothing to fear from the police, and to which only millionaire foreigners were admitted.

The grateful baroness was therefore working with might and main to ensure the triumph of Fernande's revenge, and everything indeed seemed to be progressing most favourably, for Mademoiselle de Cambremer was playing her part to perfection. Still it might be asked whether she would continue playing it to the end? Marguerite had a fantastic disposition, and was prone to sudden changes of mind. The arrival of her Canadian lover in Paris might therefore bring about a perfect revolution in her conduct. Madame de Soumans naturally dreaded such an eventuality, and thus she had become mistrustful upon learning that the bearded gamester was a Canadian.

But few Canadians visit Paris, and this one had only just arrived thore. He was young and handsome, facts which agreed remarkably well with the suppositions which the shrewd and suspicious baroness was now making. "It would really be a fatality," she thought. "Just on the very day when Fernande must have strengthened her acquaintance with that old simpleton, Madame de Serq, who is chaperoning Marguerite. All our schemes would fly away in smoke, if the girl met the man she loved—she did love him, loved him madly, I'm sure of it; women always worship the men who ruin them. And the misfortune is that Marguerite is dreadfully headstrong and wilful: and besides there is nothing to prove, as yet, that she will take a liking to Valbourg."

Whilst Madame de Soumans was reasoning in this style, Justin steadily continued winning, and Monsieur Laramie's "pocket money" visibly diminished. Despite all his endeavours his bank notes flew, one, two, three, ten at a time into the box with the glass lid in which the vidame's capital was stored.

"But surely I must have lost my head," suddenly resumed the baroness, pursuing her train of thought. "This fellow is rolling in wealth, whereas Marguerite's lover is a beggar. If by any chance he had made a fortune he would have immediately written to his lady love to inform her of his coming. This young fellow, who scatters bank notes, and sees them fly away without as much as a frown, can't be her lover. No matter, I should like to know the name of this eccentric gamester—but his companion, who looks as though he were his servant, doesn't seem disposed to tell it me. Pooh! Sartilly must know it, and I shall learn it from him when the game is over."

Justin, after trying the "squares" and the "dozens" without mishap, had now again reverted to his transversal which continued favouring him. It was as if some familiar spirit whispered the winning numbers to him in advance. In the meanwhile Monsieur Laramie had been reduced to his final packet of notes, and this one speedily disappeared in the same direction as the others. A fatal zero carried it away.

Luck had decidedly changed; moreover the bank was now winning largely, for with the exception of Justin, all the players were out of pocket.

The Canadian now quietly rose up, and Justin, seeing that his funds were exhausted, made him a sign to the effect that the money he had won was at his disposal. However, M. Laramie replied by a gesture declining the offer, and walked towards the door.

The valet could not allow him to go off alone, so he staked all his counters on a single number, lost them, pocketed his bank-notes without counting them, and then retired without as much as saying good-bye to the baroness who did not try to detain him.

He overtook his protector in the gallery, just as the vidame, who had escorted him so far, was condoling with him on account of his heavy loss and inviting him to return as often as he pleased. The leave-taking did not last long, and Justin and Laramie proceeded down the stairs. In the vestibule, which was still lighted up, they again found the footman who duly presented them with their hats and overcoats. The door then opened once more, in the same mysterious way as previously, and they went out into the street.

The Rue Mogador was silent and deserted; there was nobody in sight. Justin fancied that he had been dreaming, and he instinctively felt his pocket to make sure that his winnings were real and tangible.

"You have won a little money, I believe," said the Canadian after taking a few steps. "I am delighted that such has been the case."

"But you, sir," exclaimed Justin, "you lost a very large sum indeed, and I—"

"Oh! a few thousand francs the less won't inconvenience me," interrupted M. Laramie. "And I must say that I amused myself a good deal. This is a very curious place. What is your opinion of the vidame and the baroness?"

"I think that you paid a very high price for the honour of making their acquaintance, and—"

Justin was unable to finish his sentence, for at that moment some fellows who had been hiding in the embrasure of a carriage entrance, darted forward and sprung upon both the valet and his companion. Three of these rascals attacked M. Laramie who lacked the time to defend himself, for one of his assailants caught hold of his cravat and gave it a genuine garroter's twist. Nobody, however vigorous he may be, can resist the effect of this twist. He perforce sinks to the ground half strangled, when, indeed, he is not strangled altogether.

Laramie, therefore, fell upon the pavement, and two of the bandits then began searching his pockets with remarkable celerity. Two others had caught hold of Justin, and held his arms securely; and as soon as he opened his mouth to call for help, one of his captors exclaimed in a hoarse voice: "If you say a word I shall lead you. But if you hold your tongue, you won't be hurt. We don't want anything of yours."

In point of fact, the two ruffians who held his arms did not

make any attempt to rifle his pockets, so that it seemed likely that the promise which had just been made to him would be kept. Moreover, the street was deserted : the wine shop at the corner had long since been shut up. The Opera House was some little distance off, and there did not seem to be anybody within hearing. Accordingly, Justin kept silent. This conduct was not at all heroic on his part, but the valet was by no means anxious to be considered a hero. He was particularly desirous of saving his skin, since the roulette table had so opportunely enriched him ; and he knew very well that his assailants could not hesitate to knife him if he offered the slightest resistance. By the faint gleam of a street lamp, a short distance off, he had already recognised the bandits ; they were the very masqueraders who had formed the "village wedding" party at the opera-house ball.

"We are sold," now grumbled the troubadour, who had been busy searching the Canadian. "I have felt in all this fellow's pockets. There are no shiners or flimsies either. He must have been cleared out at the place he just left."

"That's denced bad luck for us," growled the village bride, who was holding Laramie at the throat. "All the same, just unhook his ticker."

"No, no," replied the troubadour, "that's forbidden. The governor doesn't want us to take jewellery which couldn't well be disposed of and which might be recognised. But supposing I search the other chap ?"

"A flunkey ! Oh, i' isn't worth while ; we had better let them go, and make ourselves scarce."

This suggestion was acted upon with remarkable promptitude. Justin received in his back a formidable blow which threw him upon M. Laramie, whom the bandits had left lying on the side walk. When he was able to rise again the "village wedding" party was already far away.

CHAPTER V.

It was past noon, and Madame de Soumans was still in bed when her old and faithful servant brought her her chocolate. It must be admitted that the baroness had retired to rest at seven o'clock in the morning, and that for some time past she had not enjoyed much sleep. Her fortune was made. She had dreamt of it during long years, but three weeks had not elapsed since she had set to work in view of changing her fancies into facts ; the result so far surpassing all her hopes. In little more than a fortnight, roulette had restored to her all that it had taken from her, during her long existence. As the Duc de Morny once remarked, to succeed in life, one must be on the side of the broom handle ; and, as regards gambling, this means that only croupiers grow rich.

The baroness was a devout believer in this axiom, and it had always been her ambition to hold a bank with a respectable capital. However, she had not been rich enough to imitate the managers of the Monte Carlo hell at Monaco. The play that went on in her small rooms in the Rue du Rocher could not possibly enrich her. The only people who came to see her were old friends as needy as herself,—broken down old countesses who tried to win a few francs to buy a new dress or a new bonnet with. There was a hard fight for virtually nothing at all ; and, as regards the baroness, she merely amused herself to her own cost.

One of her relatives, the Vidame de Sartilly, a genuine but impudent nobleman, had, however, often spoken to her of a capitalist of his acquaintance who had an idea of opening an establishment in Paris destined to compete with the great clubs, especially with those which wealthy foreigners mainly patronize. This intelligent speculator, who had no foolish prejudices, was of opinion that everyone did not care for baccarat ; and that a number of wealthy players would be glad to find, at a stone's throw from the grand opera-house, a roulette table managed on the same principles as at Monaco. He knew very well that the police only catch small fry in their nets, and that they do not pay any attention to millionaires anxious to ruin themselves. It was only a question of selecting his guests and taking proper precautions. Petty mashers cry out when they are fleeced, but boyards and South American millionaires let themselves be plucked without complain-

ing, that is provided they have no reason to suspect that they have been cheated.

The house in the Rue Mogador was already bought, and ready for the purpose for which it was intended ; the funds also were ready ; and the customers, recruited among the new arrivals in Paris, were quite prepared to lose their money. A few games had even been already played, under the management of an ex-croupier of the Homburg gaming tables, and the result had been superb, at least so far as the enterprising capitalist was concerned.

However the latter preferred to remain in the background, and wanted some one better than a mere croupier to take his place. He wished to be represented by a couple of good appearance, and he was seeking for a gentleman and a lady of mature age, both more or less ruined and having formerly moved in the very best society, possessing a dignified mien and polished manners, and yet acquainted with the business and willing to preside at the games.

The difficulty consisted in finding honest folks, prepared to be compromised, if need were, but incapable of robbing their sleeping partner who could not keep his eyes upon them, as he did not care to frequent the establishment. And so, by way of guarantee, he wished them to take a share in the bank—advancing a hundred thousand francs and drawing ten per cent of the profits, the capital of this private roulette bank being fixed at a million of francs.

Now, the Vidame de Sartilly would have suited this capitalist very well ; only the vidame was penniless, having lost his patrimony during his youth, in the Frascati gambling hells. He lived very poorly on an allowance which he received from a distant relative, and such was also the case with his old friend, Madame de Soumans. They did not possess a couple of hundred louis in hard cash between them.

Such, at least, was the position of their affairs when Madame Mircille decided to advance the funds necessary for the furtherance of the scheme of vengeance which Clorinde had so artfully devised. As the young widow did not at all wish to figure in the affair, the money, intended for Margot, necessarily passed through the hands of the baroness, who, one must do her the justice to say, at once placed it at Rothschild's, on a current account in Mademoiselle de Cainbremer's name.

Margot, little Margot, the whilom tenant of the shabbily-furnished rooms in the Rue du Rocher, now had a banking account, and signed cheques without counting. Moreover, it generally happened that whenever she needed any money, she begged the baroness to go and fetch it for her at the bank. Margot had not again set foot in the Rue du Rocher, but Madame de Soumans went to see her in her rooms at the Hôtel Bristol, on the Place Vendôme, at a time of day when she was certain of not meeting the Countess de Serq there.

Now, it happened that one morning, Clorinde, tempted by the vidame's proposals, asked her young friend to sign a cheque for a

cool hundred thousand ; and Margot, who was not avaricious, but, on the contrary, always ready to oblige the baroness, had done as she was requested without even inquiring for what purpose this large sum was required.

Margot was, indeed, living in the clouds, and did not for one moment think of how or when her golden dream would finish. However, Clorinde, who was of a more practical turn of mind, said to herself that it would be hard, indeed, to miss making a fortune, owing to the lack of a few thousand francs, which she could easily borrow from her young friend, and speedily return to her, as roulette never betrays those who hold the bank.

Clorinde had embarked on her functions in the Rue Mogador three days after Mademoiselle de Cambremer had made her entry into society, and she had been most successful. The bank won, on the average, some fifty thousand francs every evening, and the vidame and the baroness duly pocketed their share of the spoils. The "zero" now belonged to them, and the "zero" proved a gold mine, an inexhaustible spring, like that of Pactolus. The last night's play had, moreover, proved more productive than all the others together. Not only had the Canadian gone off with his pockets empty, but the Russians, the Brazilians, and the Roumanians, also had been completely routed. The capital, which Fernande had unwittingly supplied, was already trebled, and Clorinde was in a position to refund it, whilst still remaining a partner in this highly-lucrative business.

This is what she was thinking of while she sipped her chocolate, for she was honest in her own way, and quite incapable of profiting by Margot's carelessness to appropriate for good a sum of money with which it had been intended she should purchase the furniture for the house in the Rue Galilée. This money, moreover, really belonged to Clorinde's benefactress, Madame Mireille, whom she was very fond of, although she had somewhat neglected her of late in attending to her own interests.

"To-day, or to-morrow," reflected Madame de Soumans, "I will go and pay this money into Marguerite's account. All is well that ends well ! The question is, to know how the scheme, into which I have dragged Fernande, will finish. I no longer dare to go and see her, and I don't at all know how she is now situated as regards Valbourg and the Count de Bolgos. She wrote to me that she hoped to be able to take a decisive step soon. She had arranged a meeting at some theatre. However, she still seems to be engaged in preparations for it, whereas she ought to act quickly. There is nothing like striking the iron while it is hot, and I doubt whether Marguerite will persevere in playing this part. If her new life began to bore her, or some whim got into her head, she might throw us over without any ceremony. I have been neglecting her ; I haven't seen her since last Thursday, and to make sure of her, one ought to doctor her mind every day. There isn't to be any play to-night, as the vidame feels tired. Not I ! But we have won enough

to allow ourselves one night's rest. So, to-morrow morning, I will go out early, and have a chat with Mademoiselle de Cambrémier."

Having arrived at this praiseworthy resolution Madame de Soumans sprang out of bed, slipped on a dressing-gown and turned her attention to her toilet. She took especial care of her person, and was very particular as to everything being spick and span in her rooms, which she meant to leave, however, very shortly, for more commodious premises. "Afternoon school" was no longer held between the hours of four and six, and the little second-hand roulette table had been burnt with all its paraphernalia. Having arrived at wealth, the baroness meant to change her skin as it were, and reside in quite another part of Paris. She had told her friends of both sexes that she meant to leave very shortly for Monaco. Only one person knew her real intentions, that old and dear friend of hers, the venerable vidame, who, on his side, now saw brighter days gleaming ahead, after passing through a long and trying season of drought.

"If Fernande would only take it into her head to come and see me to-day," reflected Clorinde, "I should advise her not to remain inactive. Since fortune has been smiling upon me in another direction, I have had a kind of presentiment that Margot will slip through our fingers if we don't keep a watch on her; and especially if we let matters drag. One can't have every happiness at one and the same time. Luck is intermittent in life; it is only exceptionally that one lights upon a series."

Whilst she was thus reflecting, comparing existence to gambling, in accordance with her wont, her servant knocked at the door, and, upon being told to come in, announced that Mariette had arrived and particularly wished to see "Madame la Baronne."

"I gave her orders never to call here," grumbled Madame de Soumans. "No matter! I am not sorry to see her. Tell her to come in." Then while the servant went in search of the maid, Clorinde resumed: "What can she have of so pressing a nature to tell me? I have picked her almost out of the gutter half a score of times, and I found her a situation with Margot because I thought I could depend on her. Shall I now have to keep my eye on her?"

At this moment Mariette entered the room. Her eyes were red and she looked so tired that the baroness at once asked her: "Where can you have come from? You don't look as if you had slept in your bed."

"Why, I have come from mademoiselle's, madame," replied the maid quite unabashed.

"Is that true?" asked the baroness, looking attentively at Mariette.

"The proof is, madame, that my mistress sent me here to request you to come and see her to-morrow morning."

"I will not fail to do so. But you must just tell me the truth, my girl. You may have discharged your duties this morning, but

I am sure that you didn't go to bed last night. I can see that by your complexion. You are as yellow as a lemon."

"One can't hide anything from you, madame," answered Mariette. "And, besides, I didn't intend to do so, for I came here expressly with the intention of—"

"Telling me what pranks you have been up to? But it is useless, for I can guess the truth. It was Saturday, yesterday, and you must have been to some public ball."

"To the masquerade ball, at the Opera-House, yes, madame. You didn't forbid me to take a little amusement."

"No; but you will come to grief, I can foresee that. And to think that I found you a situation in which you could make your fortune in six months' time! If you go gadding about like that, however, I shall advise Mademoiselle de Cambremer to discharge you."

"Oh! I shall keep steady as soon as mademoiselle is settled in the Rue Galilée. But you know, madame, that I have kept my room in the Rue de Greffulhc, pending mademoiselle's stay at the Hotel Bristol. It was agreed that I should do so when I entered mademoiselle's service."

"Perhaps so; but it was also understood that you should be at her orders from morning to night. She was to have gone to the theatre yesterday evening—"

"And she did go, madame," interrupted Mariette, "and I was still at the hotel when she came back at ten o'clock, with a lady friend."

"The Countess de Serq, of course."

"No, madame, it was a lady I don't know."

"Ah! indeed! What was this lady like?"

"She was young, good-looking and tall."

"With fair hair?"

"Reddish hair, madame."

"Hadn't she a slim waist, a very full bust and a creamy complexion?"

"Yes, that was it! And she brought mademoiselle back to the hotel in a very stylish carriage. The coachman and the footman in full livery, and the horses, such delightful prancers! I saw all that from the window."

"Well, now I know who that lady was. She will often return to the hotel. She is a friend of Madame de Serq's. But did she remain long with your mistress?"

"Oh! not more than five minutes, madame. I helped mademoiselle to undress and then she dismissed me. Otherwise I should not have ventured to—"

"Apropos of Madame de Serq," interrupted the baroness. "You must remember that I told you never to mention my name in her presence. We are not on good terms; and I don't want her to know that I go to see Mademoiselle de Cambremer."

"Oh! you may be easy on that point, madame," protested Mariette hastily.

"And besides," added Madame de Soumans, "I must ask you to remember that I procured you that situation so that you might tell me everything without once mentioning my name to anybody."

"That is how I understood it, madame," answered the maid with a slight smile.

"Then just tell me what has been going on since I last went to see Mademoiselle de Cambremer."

"Why, madame, there's nothing to tell—mademoiselle seldom goes out in the day-time and her only visitor is Madame de Serq. She lunches in her sitting-room, and dines every evening with the countess in the Faubourg St. Germain. Now and then of an afternoon, Madame de Serq calls to fetch her with her old carriage and they go shopping together or take a drive in the Bois de Boulogne."

"That is as I anticipated. And is your mistress gay?"

"Oh! no, madame, that she isn't! I even fancy that she has some worry or other, and it wouldn't astonish me if she cried when she was alone. I have several times seen her with red eyes."

"Really! why didn't you tell me that before?" asked the baroness who considered this to be a serious piece of news.

"I meant to do so," replied Mariette, "but I was waiting for an opportunity. Whenever you call, mademoiselle is always there, and I can't speak to you in her presence."

"Then you ought to have taken the trouble to come here," said Madame de Soumans severely.

"But you have often told me, madame, to come here as seldom as possible—and if I ventured to come to-day it is only because I—"

"Because you have need of me in some way or other. I know you, my girl. But speak out. Aren't you satisfied with the situation? Have you come to ask me to get your wages raised? If so, it would be a pretty piece of impertinence."

"Oh! no, madame, it isn't that. I have never been in such a good situation before. Mademoiselle is very kind, and gives me her dresses and hats and bounets as soon as she is tired of them which soon happens. In fact, to tell you the truth, madame, she is very extravagant."

"And so she has a right to be!" exclaimed Madame Soumans. "Don't you know that she is several times a millionaire."

"Oh! indeed! She has millions, has she? Well I shouldn't need as much to be perfectly happy for the rest of my days," said Mariette, heaving a sigh, "and it only depends on you, madame, to make me so."

"What? do you imagine that I am going to buy you an annuity?" rejoined the baroness.

"Oh! no. You have already done enough for me, madame. Still, without putting your hand in your pocket, you might enable me to earn a large sum of money."

"Ah! ah! Some piece of fraud, no doubt! You intrigue too much, my girl. Mark my words, you will come to a bad end."

"Oh! I shouldn't dare to ask you, madame, to mix yourself up

in any shady affair. It is simply a question of some information which you can easily give me."

"Information indeed ! About whom or what ?" asked the baroness, fairly surprised.

"About a young woman who used to live here, in the house, and who went away without giving her new address."

Madame de Soumans had so little expected this reply that she gave a violent start. She had taken good care not to acquaint Mariette with Mademoiselle de Cambremer's true antecedents. She had simply sent her to the Hotel Bristol, as a maid out of work, and at her, Clorinde's, recommendation, Marguerite had taken the girl into her service. Mariette, on her side, had been allowed to believe that her new mistress had recently arrived in France from America.

"Can the girl have discovered our secret ?" thought Clorinde, feeling extremely anxious. "It would be very annoying if she had, and our little scheme might fall through."

"You are no doubt astonished at my asking you this, madame," now resumed Mariette, "but that is because you are not aware—"

"Oh ! I'm certainly not aware of what the other people living in the house, do. Why don't you apply to the doorkeeper ? He will give you all the information you want."

"Oh ! I tried to question him, but he snarled at me like the dog in the manger. He pretended that I belonged to the police and declared that there were no single women living in the house. But that was a fib, for I saw one woman at a window on the first floor."

"Yes, indeed !" exclaimed the baroness, "a hussy who disgraces the house. That's why I mean to move from here next July. - But if that is the woman you are after, why didn't you knock at the door ? She'll tell you all about herself, never fear."

"Oh ! she isn't the person I have to deal with, madame," replied Mariette. "The one I want to find went away from here three weeks ago."

"I daresay, there are some furnished rooms downstairs and people are constantly arriving and leaving. But I know nothing at all about them, and I don't want to have anything to do with such disreputable characters."

"Oh ! the person I want to find can't have been disreputable."

"What was she, then ?" asked the baroness, whose anxiety was reaching a climax.

"Well, all that I can tell you, madame," replied Mariette, "is that she was a foreigner."

"But you must know her name ?" resumed Clorinde, giving the maid a searching look.

"Indeed I don't," answered the girl. "Still I shall find it out."

"Well, when you know it, come and see me ; and I will let my servant make some inquiries. In the meanwhile, just explain how it happens that you spend your time trying to find people who have

moved from this house or that? I begin to believe that you are *amusing yourself at my expense.*"

"Indeed, I'm not, madame," Mariette replied; "and I wouldn't disturb you, madame, if the matter wasn't a serious one. This is the affair. An American has just arrived in Paris in search of his lady-love and he hasn't yet been able to find her. He would give a great deal of money if he could only discover her whereabouts."

"An American, you say?"

"Yes; a gentleman from California."

Clorinde breathed again! California is a long way distant from Canada. "And did this woman he is in search of live in this house?" she asked.

"Yes, madame, it *seems* so; only she made off without giving him any warning; and when he called to try to find her he couldn't learn anything about her. The doorkeeper, who is a surly fellow, declared that it was none of his business."

"The Californian must have been mistaken," now suggested Clorinde.

"Oh! no, madame," answered Mariette, "he told me No 99 Rue du Rocher."

"But didn't you ask him what this person's name was?"

"I didn't have time to do that, but I shall see him again."

"And what is his name, pray?"

"I'm sure I don't know. All that I know about him is that he is staying at the Grand Hotel."

"This story of yours is becoming more and more incomprehensible, my girl," muttered Madame de Soumans. "At all events you saw the Californian gentleman since you spoke to him. What is he like?"

"Young and very handsome," replied Mariette. "In fact he's a kind of giant, with big soft blue eyes and superb teeth. You don't often see such a face as his in Paris, or such a beard either."

"A beard!" exclaimed Madame de Soumans, struck by a strange idea.

"Yes, madame," answered Mariette, "a beard as long as the one that the Wandering Jew wore. Americans are always so eccentric."

"And what was the colour of this wonderful beard?" asked the baroness.

"Oh! it was of a light golden colour, and as fine as silk. He could find any number of sweethearts in Paris, if he only chose; but it seems that he wants to content himself with the one he is looking for. Foreigners are so dreadfully stupid, you know, madame."

"And didn't you say that this man was rich?" inquired Madame de Soumans, steadily pursuing her questions, and secretly feeling more and more alarmed.

"Oh! he's immensely rich, madame," replied Mariette; "that's

evident, for he pays a hundred francs a day for his rooms at the Grand Hotel ; and you would hardly believe me, madame, if I told you what a sum he offers as a reward to the person who finds his princess for him."

"What sum is it then ?"

"Why, fifty thousand dollars, and as a dollar is worth five francs, that makes a quarter of a million, according to my reckoning. You see that I don't hide anything from you, madame. Ah ! if I could only secure that reward, I could leave off waiting upon others, and live upon my own income comfortably."

A spell of silence ensued. Madame de Soumans was thinking of the gamester, whom Disney, the Yankee, had sent to the establishment in the Rue Mogador, and whose name she had failed to learn from the vidame, as the latter had forgotten to question the new-comer upon the point. In fact Monsieur Laramie had presented himself with his Yankee friend's admission card.

"When did you see this Californian ?" asked Madame de Soumans, suddenly turning towards Mariette.

"Last night, madame," replied the maid. "You see that I haven't lost any time in starting the search. The reward is so tempting, you know."

"Last night, you say ? How's that ? What o'clock was it ?"

"Between two and three. I just told you, madame, that I had been to the Opera-House ball."

"And did he stay there ?"

"No, madame. He was going off when I met him in the passage on the grand tier, at the top of the staircase. Ah ! it was a funny meeting and no mistake !"

"And he wasn't alone ?" asked Clorinde.

"Alone ! why yes—at least I didn't notice," stammered the girl.

"You are telling me a falsehood ! He was with a Frenchman, a young fellow—with a clean shaven face—looking for all the world like a manservant."

"How can you possibly know that, madame ?" asked Mariette in amazement.

"That isn't your business. Is it true, yes or no ?"

"Yes, it is true, madame."

"And the young fellow, the clean shaven one, do you know him ?"

Mariette, who was quite disconcerted, hesitated about replying.

"Listen, my girl," said the baroness drily, "if you frankly tell me the whole truth, I may perhaps help you to earn that reward, though I don't for one moment believe that it will amount to anything like fifty thousand dollars ; however, I swear to you that if you try to deceive me in this matter, you sha'n't remain for twenty-four hours longer in Mademoiselle de Cambremer's service."

"Oh ! I can easily tell madame everything. Why should I hide the truth ? It isn't forbidden to have a sweetheart."

"So that Frenchman, who accompanied the Californian to the ball—"

"Was my sweetheart; yes, madame. We intend to marry—especially if the affair succeeds."

"He is in the swim, then?"

"It was he who first picked up an acquaintance with the Californian."

"Where did he manage to do that?" asked Clorinde.

"On the boulevard, madame," said Mariette. "The American was having a brush with some rascals who had pushed him about. He was taken to the police station: but Justin had seen the tussle and he gave evidence in the Yankee's favour. So, when the gentleman was released, he took Justin with him to the Grand Hotel and explained to him why he had come to Paris. Justin naturally offered to find the woman, the Yankee accepted his services, and then they made an appointment to meet at the Grand Opera House. But, in the meantime, Justin joined me at a café, and—"

"Who is this fellow Justin?" interrupt'd the Baroness de Soumans, impatiently.

"He is a valet, madame, but he wasn't always one. He comes of a good family and is well educated. The Yankee took him for a clerk, and, in proof of it, he suggested that he should go to America with him and become his secretary."

"Then this person means to return to America?"

"Oh! yes, madame, in a month's time if he doesn't find his sweetheart," said Mariette.

"And you went to the Opera-House with them, eh?"

"Oh! no, madame. I should have been in their way—in Justin's way, I mean. Only I approached them just as they were going off. I felt inquisitive—you will understand that, madame—and I wanted the Yankee to repeat to me what he had already said to my sweetheart. And I did precious well right, for it was then that he spoke to me about the Rue de Rocher. I don't believe that Justin then knew where the Yankee's sweetheart had resided."

"But he knows it now?"

"Yes; however he doesn't know *you*, madame, and he won't come here, or if he does, he won't think of applying to *you*, madame."

"I hope he won't. You didn't tell him, I suppose, that *you* knew *me*?" said Madame de Soumans.

"Oh dear no, madame! I don't talk about my private affairs like that."

"Very good. And remember that I forbid your speaking to him about *me*. However, the American saw *you* of course?"

"Excuse me madame, he didn't see my face, for I was masked, and besides, I wore a domino. I puzzled him, that's all. He has no notion that I'm a lady's maid."

"And he mustn't have one. But I'm afraid that your lover will tell him."

"There's no danger of that. In the first place we are not on very good terms, Justin and I. He tried to shelve me, and that annoyed me ; so I played him the trick of tackling the Californian in his presence—and he wasn't able to prevent my doing so. Oh ! it didn't take me long. I went off as soon as I had the address."

"Then you didn't follow them out of the Opera-House ?"

"Oh ! dear no. I had found out all that I wanted to know."

"And you didn't ask them where they were going ?" insisted Madame de Soumans.

"Oh ! it was all the same to me, madame," replied Mariette. "Justin must have seen the American home, or else they went to supper together. As for myself I quietly went to bed, and this morning I was up and ready to wait on mademoiselle."

"You didn't speak to her about your night's adventure, I hope ?" said the baroness.

"Oh ! madame, you surely can't imagine that I should do such a thing ?" protested Mariette.

"Well it's useless for her to know anything about it."

"Oh ! I have no wish to lose my situation as yet. I haven't got hold of the fifty thousand dollars so far. And in fact, I begin to fear that I sha'n't secure the reward, for to tell the truth, madame, I had relied upon you ; but you can't help me, as you don't know anything about the people who have been living in the house."

Mariette sighed as she made this remark ; and the baroness answered : "My servant shall make some inquiries, that is all that I can promise you. However, you have done quite right to explain matters to me fully, and you will do still better if you hold your tongue in future. Not a word about all this to anyone, mind, if you care to retain your situation and my good-will."

Mariette was again about to protest that she would comply with the baroness's instructions, when the old servant entered the room and announced that Madame Mireille had called and was waiting. "She has come in the nick of time," thought Madame de Soumans, when she had given orders to have Fernande shown into the drawing-room. "I was just going to see her, for it is necessary that she should know about what is going on. Everything would be compromised if we did not take measures at once."

"You will excuse me, madame, for having disturbed you," now said Mariette, who already began to regret having paid her protectress a fruitless visit.

"I not only excuse you, my girl," said Clorinde gravely, "but, I request you to call again. Your story amuses me and I shall like to be kept informed about it. Besides, you know that I take an interest in you and that my assistance is not to be despised. I will perhaps lend you a hand so as to enable you to make your fortune. Only, it seems to me, that your lover is one too many in this affair."

"Oh ! I didn't bring him into it," hastily said Mariette.

"No, indeed, I am aware of that. It was rather the contrary," rejoined Clorinde. "However, are you particularly attached to that young fellow ?"

"Not particularly, madame. He has his good points, but he is dreadfully obstinate at times. And, besides, it is a great mistake to care for a man ; all men are alike—if one's lost, a dozen can be found."

"Well, if you take my advice, my girl, you will give this Monsieur Justin the cold shoulder, and work for the American without his help."

"That's just what I should like to do, madame ; but Justin has a hold on the Yankee, and I don't fancy that he will let go of him very easily."

"You might persuade the American to give him the go by."

"It won't be easy."

"Would you like me to attend to the matter ?" asked Clorinde.

"What ! would you be kind enough, madame—"

"Well, you know that I take an interest in you, my girl ; and if you follow my advice, properly, I will perhaps go to see this foreigner. I presume you don't fear that I shall spoil your game or appropriate the reward—"

"Oh, no, madame !" exclaimed Mariette, who was perhaps not altogether speaking the truth.

"However, I must first know this gentleman's name," resumed Madame de Soumans.

"I'll find it out. The people at the Grand Hotel will tell me."

"And then you'll come and see me again. Agreed. And as for your sweetheart, don't have anything more to do with him."

"All right. He hasn't been so kind and amiable that I need sacrifice my interests to him," said Mariette.

"By the way," observed the baroness, "in whose service is this fellow Justin ?"

"When I first made his acquaintance he was in the service of a count who lived in the Rue Jean Gorgon—Count de Bolgos."

"Ah !" exclaimed Clorinde, the expression of whose face suddenly changed. "And whom is he serving now ?"

"Oh ! he's with a gentleman on the Boulevard Malesherbes.

"On the Boulevard Malesherbes ?" repeated the baroness, becoming more and more disturbed.

"Yes, madame, a Monsieur Valbourg—a bachelor—the situation is a good one, I know, and Justin would like to keep it."

This time Madame de Soumans made no rejoinder. Her emotion was paralysing her. She dismissed Mariette with a gesture, and then slowly walked towards the drawing-room where Madame Mireille was waiting. "Ah !" she reflected. "The cup is full. The fiend must be working against us.. I have bad news indeed to communicate to Fernande."

She found Madame Mireille walking up and down the apartment,

which was a very unpretentious drawing-room, the furniture being upholstered in cotton velvet, while the walls were decorated with engravings representing the "Children in the Tower" and the "Execution of Lady Jane Gray," after the well-known paintings by Paul Delaroche. Clorinde had a downcast expression on her face as she crossed the threshold, but Fernande looked radiant, and, before her old friend could even open her mouth, she exclaimed : "I have brought you some good news, and in exchange you must give me some advice."

"As much advice as you like, my dear. But let us begin with the news," rejoined Madame de Soumans. "How are affairs now progressing?"

"Oh! they are progressing very well indeed," replied Madame Mireille. "Yesterday evening proved decisive. Madame de Serq formally introduced me to her young cousin, Mademoiselle de Cambremer, at the first performance which took place at the Variétés."

"That was a foregone conclusion. I always expected that everything *would* pass off satisfactorily as far as our short-sighted friend the countess was concerned ; but how did Margot behave ?"

"Admirably. She played her part like an accomplished actress : and the old lady did not for a moment imagine that the scene had been combined beforehand. However, all that is nothing compared with the rest. Chance served me admirably. Valbourg was at the theatre, and you will never guess who accompanied him—why, the Count de Bolgos, my dear."

"I wasn't aware that they were so intimate," said Clorinde.

"Oh! they have been hand and glove together for the last three weeks. Jacques, in order to amuse himself, has hit upon the idea of making the count share his pleasures."

"All men are the same," retorted the baroness, shrugging her shoulders. "Valbourg can't do without the handsome cavalier whom you think of marrying. It's the rule, you know ; a married woman's lover is always her husband's friend."

"But more than that, Valbourg brought Monsieur de Bolgos to see me in my box," said Madame Mireille.

"Oh! oh! then you and Valbourg have made peace ?"

"Yes, to all appearance ; but I don't believe that he has really forgiven me, and, in fact, he seemed quite disposed to marry someone else so as to try and spite me."

"And you encouraged him in that idea, I presume ?" said Madame de Soumans.

"Not too openly ; for he would have mistrusted me. However, I sounded the praises of Mademoiselle de Cambremer and I perceived that he was greatly taken with her. He considers her adorable, and he lost no time about paying court to her in the most undisguised fashion."

"Then you went to see Madame de Serq and Margot in their box ?"

"Better than that. We all went into the lounge together,

Jacques giving his arm to the countess and I leaning on that of Monsieur de Bolgos."

"And Margot?"

"Oh! Margot walked beside her noble relative and did not need any begging to answer the compliments which Monsieur Valbourg paid her."

"And you didn't feel mortified to see that he was so promptly consoled for your loss?" asked Clorinde.

"Perhaps I did feel a trifle out of sorts. I fancied that he still cared for me a little, but since I have learnt to know him better, I hate him all the more."

"Then you still cling to the scheme of revenge?" said Madame de Soumans.

"More than ever?" was Fernande's prompt reply.

"You won't hesitate at the last moment?" insisted Clorinde. "Come, be frank. You were head over heels in love with that big fellow Valbourg, once upon a time; and when you see him lead a pretty girl to the altar—"

"I shall remember that that pretty girl once ran away with another man, and I shall picture to myself the face which the happy bridegroom will make when you send him the Canadian's letters. You still have those letters, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes! indeed. The question is whether there will be any occasion to send them to Valbourg. Are you quite sure of Margot?"

"Well, to tell the truth she is a strange creature. After seeing the countess home last night I drove her back to the Hôtel Bristol—"

"I know that."

"How do you know it?"

"I will tell you by and by. Pray go on. As you were alone with Margot you must have spoken to her seriously."

"Certainly I did; and I must admit that she displayed a spirit of rebellion which greatly surprised me. She is quite willing to marry, but she claims the right to marry as she pleases."

"I half expected something of the kind, and I shouldn't wonder if she hadn't found Valbourg to her liking," said the baroness.

"Well, she didn't speak positively on that point. She merely promised me that she wouldn't discourage him,—that's all. And when I insisted she fired up, and told me quite straight, that if I were too exacting she would do without my protection, and tell everything to the Countess de Serq."

"In that case she ought at least to return you your money," said Clorinde.

"Oh! the money's nothing!" replied Fernande. "But if Marguerite took it into her head to tell everything to her cousin, why, I should find myself in a very unpleasant situation."

"I will prevent her doing that," rejoined the baroness. "Only I ask yourself if the poor girl isn't still regretting her Canadian, and when I have told you what is going on—"

"Oh!" interrupted Fernande, "I fancy that her resistance has another motive. If it were a question of marrying Monsieur de Bolgos, Marguerite would probably be a deal more willing."

"Bolgos! did he pay her any attention, then?" asked Clorinde.

"Not at all! But she found him to her taste."

"That won't suffice for him to offer her his heart and hand."

"No indeed! For he had already offered them to me."

"What, already!" exclaimed the Baroness de Soumans raising her hands in astonishment.

"Yes, yesterday, on the balcony at the Variétés, while Valbourg was flirting with Mademoiselle de Cambremer. The count made me a positive and pressing declaration. Oh! he didn't indulge in light-flown language, he didn't talk about worshipping me and all that—"

"He is too much a man of the world to play the part of a Romeo—"

"Yes; he spoke to me seriously. He began by giving me to understand that if he had ceased calling upon me it was because he had feared that I was engaged to Valbourg, and he did not care to poach upon a friend's preserves. Then he added that he was tired of wandering about the world as he had done for fifteen years, and that he should like to marry a Parisian woman, and establish himself in France, a woman of position and sufficiently intelligent to be able to understand him, a woman of his strength, that was the expression which he used."

"You are of greater moral strength than he is," interrupted the Baroness de Soumans.

"No matter. He ended by asking me what I should say if the Countess de Serq called upon me on his behalf."

"She would be a capital ambassadress; he could not select a better one. She is a determined match maker; and I am even afraid that she will try to marry Margot off, on her own side. However, what reply did you give to the count's overtures?"

"I did not give any. An incident occurred which dispensed me with the necessity of answering; and, besides, before saying 'yes' or 'no,' I wanted to consult you, and that is why I have called here this morning; for I have no time to lose. Monsieur de Bolgos talked of sending the countess to-morrow, which means to-day; so that I may have a visit from her this afternoon, and it is the more likely as she spoke to me about the count in the most enthusiastic terms. She admires his character, she asserts that he possesses every quality, and that his father, with whom she was formerly well acquainted, left him a splendid fortune which he has considerably increased."

"She is not mistaken on that point. Bolgos is very rich, much richer than you are, and of the highest nobility, also. If you should become Countess de Bolgos, Valbourg will bitterly regret having treated you with disdain. As I said before, all men are the same. They never find out what a woman is worth until she

marries some one else, and when that some one else is superior to themselves, they go mad with jealousy."

"Then you advise me to accept Monsieur de Bolgos's proposal?" asked Madame Mireille.

"Oh! without the slightest hesitation, and for two reasons. In the first place, because Margot might take it into her head to try and captivate Bolgos—she wouldn't succeed, I hope, but she might worry you; and, also, and especially, because this marriage would secure you one half of your revenge, whereas the other half might slip through your fingers."

"You mean that Valbourg will perhaps not marry that girl. Well, I am certain that he is quite disposed to do so. He had the audacity to ask me for my opinion of Mademoiselle de Cambremer, and I was skilful enough to advise him to make some inquiries about her, before going any further. I let him think that I felt jealous, and—I know him—he needs nothing more to bring matters to an issue at once."

"My dear Fernande," now said the baroness, assuming an air of gravity, "we are threatened with a very worrying misfortune. The man who wronged Margot, is now in Paris."

"The man—what man?"

"Why the Canadian—he has arrived, too late, it's true, since Margot, tired of waiting for him, has already decided to change her mode of life. But at all events he is here, in Paris, and we shall be obliged to contend against him."

"Ah! Good heavens!" exclaimed Fernande. "And is Marguerite aware that he is here?"

"No; he hasn't yet found her, as she has fortunately left this house, but he is looking for her, and if he learnt that she was living at the Hotel Bristol, he would hasten there at once."

"He *will* learn it, or else he will meet her somewhere in Paris," said Madame Mireille, who was greatly agitated. "She drives out every day, you know."

"Yes, it is to be feared that he will end by discovering her address."

"But do you think that he will dare to call upon Mademoiselle de Cambremer after treating her in such a way as he did?"

"Why not, if he is in love with her?"

"But you forget that he despoiled her of her fortune," urged Fernande.

"Her fortune—oh! he is in a position to return it to her with compound interest. He has made a heap of money in America."

"How is it that you happen to be so well informed? Have you seen this fellow, then?"

"Yes, I have seen him, but I did not know at the time that it was he. I will explain everything to you. But first of all do you think of abandoning the game on account of this mishap?"

"Oh! I have advanced too far to retreat; and if you know of any means of winning—"

"I don't know of any certain means; still we may have a try. I have a plan of my own which might succeed; everything would depend upon the way in which it was carried out, and I would attend to that."

"Speak then. I am listening," said Madame Mireille, whose emotion was still very keen.

"Well, you must first know, how far luck is against us. By a strange and disastrous chance Mariette met this Canadian—"

"Who is Mariette?" asked Fernande.

"The maid whom I send to wait on Marguerite."

"Ah! yes. But in that case everything must be lost—he must have told that girl why he had come to Paris."

"Well, he promised to give her no less than two hundred and fifty thousand francs, if she found a young woman, who had been living in the Rue du Rocher, and who had moved some three weeks ago without saying where she was going. This fellow is rolling in money, that is evident—the reward he offers is sufficient proof of it. And Mariette is only too anxious to win this reward. She came here at once to ask me for some information about this tenant, who had left under such strange circumstances."

"Then she isn't aware that Mademoiselle de Cambremer is in question?" asked Fernande.

"Oh, dear no! When I sent her to the Hotel Bristol with a letter recommending her to Margot, I took good care not to acquaint her with our secrets. She believes that her mistress has just come straight from America; and, as the Canadian, fortunately, did not tell her the name of the woman he wanted to find, she has no notion that this same woman is none other than our friend Marguerite."

"The notion may come to her. A quick-witted person would be sure to make a comparison eventually."

"And Mariette is quick-witted, I can tell you."

"Then Marguerite must dismiss her as soon as possible. That depends on you."

"Well, I think that Marguerite ought to keep her. If the girl were dismissed she would escape from our control, whereas, as matters stand, I hold her. She has promised me not to do anything without consulting me, and also to come and see me very often."

"But she will also see the Canadian," urged Madame Mireille, "and—"

"Oh! I shall see him before she does," retorted Clorinde. "But let me finish. You don't know everything yet. Mariette has a sweetheart; and it was through this sweetheart that she became acquainted with Margot's old lover. And, now, prepare to be astonished, this sweetheart is none other than your friend Valbourg's valet."

"It is incredible!" gasped Fernande in dismay.

"And before he served Valbourg he was in Monsieur de Bolgos's

employ. It's perfect you see. And for nothing to be wanting, this fellow, no doubt, knows you."

"No, I have never seen him," replied Madame Mireille regaining her composure. "You are well aware that Valbourg never took any valet with him when we met in the country and in Switzerland."

"I dare say, but you called on Valbourg here in Paris, at times, and you must have seen this valet then."

"No, never, I tell you. Jacques always sent the fellow out, when he expected a visit from me."

"But on the stairs?"

"Oh! I may have passed him on the stairs, but I always wore a veil, and before ringing at the door of the flat, I always took care to ascertain that I hadn't been followed. Valbourg invariably opened the door; and, indeed, even if this valet ever saw me, he couldn't know who I was."

"And you will never call on Valbourg again," retorted Madame de Soumans. "The danger doesn't lie in that direction. What we have to fear is chance, some improbable contingency. Paris is very large, no doubt, and yet people end by meeting some how or other. Margot may some day find herself face to face with her Canadian; and so the latter must return to Canada as soon as possible, and I shall endeavour to send him there."

"You! Why how will you manage to do that?" asked Fernande in astonishment.

"In a very simple way. I shall go to see him at the Grand Hotel where he is staying. I shall tell him that I live in the house where his lady-love resided, and that having heard that he wanted to obtain some news of her, I have come to tell him what I know about her—and when I have spoken in that fashion, he will give me a good reception, I am sure of it."

"No doubt he will; however—"

"I shall also tell him that Mademoiselle Marguerite, growing tired of waiting, decided to return to America. I shall even say that I accompanied her to the Northern Railway Station, and that I was there when she took a through ticket to Liverpool, where she had a cabin reserved on board one of the vessels of the Cunard line. You can picture the effect of my revelations. The Canadian will start off the very same evening, and, in a few weeks hence, he will reach Quebec."

"Yes," muttered Fernande, "your idea is a good one. But when he gets to Canada, he will find out that he has been fooled."

"Oh! I don't care about that!" chuckled the baroness.

"But supposing he returned to Paris?"

"It isn't likely that he would, still everything is possible, of course. And to guard against such a contingency we must hasten Margot's marriage. I will see her, and on your side you must stimulate Valbourg. If you act properly he will soon have his head in the noose. You need, merely, let him understand that you

don't believe that he could succeed in winning Mademoiselle de Cambremer, and then he will marry her as soon as he can, merely to prove that you are mistaken. As soon as he is married and done for, it will be all the funnier if the Canadian should come back. This American isn't the man to hold his tongue. There will be some violent scenes. What a scandal it *will* be, good heavens ! Why, all Paris will talk about it for a fortnight. And in the meantime, my dear Fernande, while Valbourg is the laughing stock of all his acquaintances, you will be having a countess's coronet painted on the panels of your carriages, and inaugurating your honeymoon by throwing your drawing-room doors open to all the members of the aristocracy. All the élite of the foreign colony will visit you, and the noble Faubourg St. Germain will follow suit, for Monsieur de Bolgos goes everywhere. It will suffice for the Countess de Serq to act as his ambassadress in applying for your hand. Despite her peculiar ways, she is of the most illustrious descent."

"Then you advise me to accept, supposing that she comes to me with a proposal, this afternoon?" asked Fernande.

"Yes, without hesitating," answered Clorinde, "though, of course, you will do as well to let your notary inquire into Monsieur de Bolgos's position. I have no doubt but what he is very rich, still it is always as well to take a few precautions. I presume that he is to your liking, personally?"

"Quite so."

"Oh ! he's worth a hundred Valbourgs—both physically and morally. He wouldn't treat a woman as Valbourg treated you."

"Oh ! I haven't forgotten Jacques's treatment. It's useless to remind me of it," said Madame Mireille frowning.

"Well, I won't mention it again. But you must go home ~~now~~, my dear Fernande, and await the progress of events. For my own part I intend to dress, and then I shall repair to the Grand Hotel. I have reason to believe that our Canadian won't be an early riser this morning. I don't know his name, but I can ascertain it by seeing the attendants, and I shall get to see him, I feel sure of it. If you will take the trouble to call here, to-morrow morning, I shall have a lot of news to tell you, for in the meanwhile I shall also have seen Margot. I should like to spare you the walk here, but it is better for me not to call upon you until your marriage is arranged. That old Madame de Serq is not precisely fond of me, and she wouldn't care to meet me, I feel sure of it. So behave as if I didn't exist, my dear Fernande ; but rely upon me all the same. If you inform me to-morrow that the proposal has been made and accepted, and that you are about to wear a countess's coronet, it will be the happiest day of my life."

Fernande did not reply to this speech ; in lieu thereof she suddenly inquired : "Why, what is that noise ? There is some quarrelling going on in your ante-room."

"So it seems," muttered Madame de Soumans, "recognise my servant's voice ; it is really very singular."

"Good heavens!" resumed Fernande. "Suppose it was a repetition of what took place three weeks ago—suppose it was the police."

"That is impossible. And besides I don't fear the police. There is no more gambling here."

"Yes, but I?"

"Oh ! you wouldn't be compromised. I know how to bring *commissaries* to their senses. Besides, I will go and see what the matter is," added Clorinde.

She did not have time to carry her words into effect, however, for at this same moment the door was thrown open, and in came a man wearing a knitted waistcoat and a greasy velvet cap, which he did not as much as touch. "I have had enough of all this!" he exclaimed in an insolent tone. "There must be an end to it!"

Madame Mireille, who felt extremely frightened—and indeed this fellow had assumed a most threatening mien—at once darted to the farther end of the room. But the baroness was not dismayed. She walked straight up to the intruder, caught hold of the cap which covered his bald pate, took it off and placed it in his hand.

"When people call on me they begin by uncovering their heads, Monsieur Ringard," said she quietly. "Now, pray tell me what you want."

"I want—I want—well, as I said before, I can't stand it any longer!" rejoined the new-comer, who was none other than the doorkeeper of the house. "Every day, people come and worry me to find out what has become of that friend of yours who lived on the first floor. Just now a woman came, and now there's a man."

"Well, you have only to tell them that the young lady has left the house," replied Madame de Soumans.

"Without telling me where she was going ; that's true," grunted the doorkeeper. "But she must have told you?"

"Don't meddle with things that don't concern you," retorted Clorinde harshly. "I am not accountable to you."

"Perhaps not," replied the Cerberus, "but I just warn you that when people apply to me again, I shall send them to you—and to begin with, a fellow has just come up-stairs behind me. These affairs don't concern me, so pray settle the matter with him. As for myself I am going."

"Yes, leave the room at once!" rejoined the baroness, well nigh infuriated by the fellow's insolent language and demeanour : and, having pushed him out and closed the door behind him, she approached Fernande and said : "Go into my bedroom, dear. I don't know whom that scamp has brought here, but it isn't worth while for you to be present at the explanation. As long as you hear it, that will be enough. Leave the door ajar."

Madame Mireille did as she was bidden, proceeding without more ado into the baroness's bed-chamber. These various incidents had greatly disturbed the young widow ; and she no longer understood the situation. Clorinde alone was capable of unravelling such an entangled skein, still, Fernande was not sorry to be able to keep a watch upon her proceedings, for there had been several very mysterious points in her earlier narrative. As for Clorinde, she, on her side, was in the position of a general, who at the decisive moment of battle, finds that the enemy has been unexpectedly reinforced. Still, she did not lose her head for all that ; she did not yet despair of securing the victory, and she at once started to meet the unknown adversary whom the doorkeeper had brought to her abode.

Monsieur Ringard was no longer in the ante-room. He had prudently beat a retreat ; however, the servant was holding a parley on the threshold with somebody who could not be seen. "Let the person in !" now exclaimed Madame de Sounans.

The servant was nothing loath to follow her mistress's instructions, for she had had a very hard time of it in restraining the unknown visitor. So she stepped aside, and the baroness then beheld Monsieur Francis Laramie. It would be exaggerating to say that she was stupefied. For a few moments she had had a kind of presentiment that the tenacious individual, who had followed the doorkeeper up three flights of stairs, was the same Canadian who had lost so much money at the roulette-table on the night before. Only jilted lovers or betrayed husbands are capable of displaying so much persistency.

However, Francis, on his side, was utterly bewildered when he found himself face to face with the Vidame de Sartilly's noble relative. "Excuse me, madame," he stammered, as he took off his hat, which was no longer the huge sombrero which Justin had so warmly criticised. He had lost that remarkable piece of head-gear during the scuffle in the Rue Mogador, and, in its stead, he now wore a hat of ordinary dimensions, purchased of a genuine Parisian hatter. However, he had not yet sacrificed his beard. "Excuse me, madame," he resumed, "I am no doubt mistaken, but the doorkeeper told me—"

"No, you are not mistaken, sir," resumed the baroness, with remarkable self-possession, "I am Monsieur de Sartilly's relative and friend, but I don't live in his house. These are my rooms, and if I can be of service to you in any way, I shall be delighted to place myself at your disposal. You were so very unlucky last night that—"

"Oh ! it isn't a question of the money I lost. I don't care anything about that," replied the Canadian. "I have come—"

"I know why you have come," interrupted Clorinde, "but we cannot have a conversation here. Pray, step into my drawing-room."

Laramie followed the baroness, who showed him the way, and he

even consented to sit down in the chair which she offered him, although, to tell the truth, he felt extremely impatient, and anxious to finish with the business. Madame de Soumans first darted a glance at the bedroom door, to make sure that it was ajar, and then, raising her voice, so that Fernande might hear her, she began as follows : " That scamp whom I just sent about his business has told me, sir, whom you are looking for. But may I ask you how it happened that you had the idea of applying to me ? "

" The doorkeeper gave me that idea," answered the Canadian without the slightest hesitation. " I offered him five hundred francs, so as to loosen his tongue. He first pocketed them, and then he said to me that if I liked he would place me in communication with a lady who could give me some information. I followed him upstairs, and he entered your rooms, leaving me on the landing."

" Ah ! the rascal ! " thought Clorindo. " He shall pay me for this ! "

" So here I am," resumed Laramie, " and it won't be merely five hundred francs that I will hand to you if you will--"

" Enough, sir ! " interrupted Madame de Soumans, with a dignified air, " I don't sell information, I give it--that is, whenever it suits me to do so. You wish, I have been told, to know what has become of a young woman who formerly resided in this house. I can tell you that ; but, before doing so, I wish to know what your object is in asking for this information. For what reason do you trouble yourself about this person ? And what are your intentions as concerns her ? "

" She is my betrothed, and I am trying to find her, in view of marrying her," replied the Canadian.

" Then you are Monsieur Laramie ? "

" Did she ever speak to you about me, since you know my name ? "

" Yes, often. I was her only friend here, and all her thoughts were for you. Your long absence, and especially your silence, made her suffer cruelly."

" Yes, it was very wrong of me ; but if you only knew, I was so far away, isolated in the wilds of Colorado, trying to make a fortune, which was very long in coming, till at last I made it all at one stroke."

" Don't worry about excusing yourself, sir," said Madame de Soumans. " Marguerite lacked patience."

" Where is she ? " exclaimed Laramie, whose eyes were shining with delight.

" I cannot tell you exactly, as I haven't had any news of her since her departure ; still, you will easily be able to join her."

" I don't understand you, madame."

" Why, it is simple enough. You come from the same country as herself. You are better acquainted than I am with the town where she resided in Canada."

"What of that?"

"Why, she has gone back there."

"That isn't possible! She hasn't had time to—"

"She left three weeks ago, and I can even tell you what route she took."

"No, madame, no!" protested Laramie. "She did not leave. I am certain that she is still here in Paris."

"Well, if you are so well informed, sir, what do you wish of me?" exclaimed the baroness, who thought that the Canadian was trying to ascertain whether she had spoken the truth or not.

"I have come to ask you for her address, madame," said Laramie. "She is in Paris. I am sure of it. In fact, I have seen her!"

"Seen her! When?" asked the baroness in a husky voice. This unforeseen thrust had quite disconcerted her.

"Why, to-day—this very morning. I was leaving the Grand Hotel just as she drove along the boulevard in a brougham drawn by two horses."

"You must have been deceived by a chance resemblance."

"No, no. I recognised her perfectly. I tried to join her. I sprang into a cab, but the horses of her brougham went so fast that I failed to overtake her."

"If the person you saw had been Marguerite, she would have told her coachman to stop."

"She did not see me. She went up the Champs Elysées. I waited for a long while upon the Place de la Concorde, hoping that she would come back that way, but no, I did not catch another glimpse of her. Then, in my despair, I remembered an exclamation which had escaped a woman I met last night at the Opera Masquerade. The particulars of the adventure are of no importance, but when I mentioned the number of this house in the Rue du Rocher to the woman in question, she seemed astonished; and she at once told me that she was confident that, in a couple of days' time, she would be able to find the person I was looking for. That gave me the idea that she must know some one in this house. I had already called here, and the door-keeper had told me that Marguerite had gone away without leaving any new address. This time, however, he admitted to me that there was some one living on the third floor who had been well acquainted with Marguerite, and he did not deceive me, since you admit that she was your friend. You just told me that she had returned to America, but you know very well that that is not true, and I really can't guess why you should tell me a falsehood. However, whatever your object may have been, I beg of you, madame, not to hide the truth from me. Don't hide anything; besides, it would be useless, for now that I possess a certainty, I will move heaven and earth until I have found her. This may be a very large city, but I am wealthy, and, if needs be, I will spend my whole fortune in the search, even to the last dollar."

Clorinde did not display any eagerness in answering this speech. She had not yet recovered from the disagreeable surprise of learning that the Canadian had caught sight of Margot. There was no longer any chance of sending him back to Canada under the pretext that he would find his sweetheart there. Something else must be devised. But what? By a great mischance Fernande was there within hearing, extremely disappointed, no doubt, at the failure of her friend's plan. The situation was, to all appearance, so desperate, that the baroness's faculties, albeit extremely inventive, were now sorely taxed.

"Pray answer me, madame," Laramie, at last, resumed, "I am prepared for everything—even if Margot has forgotten her pledges, I wish to know it."

This reply came as a ray of light to the vidame's noble relative. "Take care," said she, "you love that young girl, and she certainly was well worthy of you."

"And isn't she worthy of me now?"

"Don't require me to reveal things which would break your heart," said Madame de Soumans, solemnly.

"You must—tell me all—can't you see how I am suffering?" gasped Laramie, whose brow was moist with perspiration.

"Marguerite was my friend—I will not betray her," said Clorinde, "you would revenge yourself—"

"Not on her, madame, I swear it upon my honour. If she has been faithless to her promises, I will leave her to her remorse."

"And return to America without seeing her?" asked Madame de Soumans.

"Not without seeing her," answered the Canadian. "I hold her fortune upon trust, and I must return it to her. But I, once more, give you my word that I will not raise my hand against her. Men of my race don't stoop to kill a woman—even if that woman be a monster!"

"You hold her fortune, did you say?"

"Yes; she had it entrusted to me. I have doubled it for her, and I now bring it back to her."

"And you will return it to her, no matter what she may have done?" urged Clorinde.

"If I did not return it to her I should be a thief!" retorted the Canadian, in a tone of genuine indignation.

"Very well, sir. You shall know everything," said the baroness, gravely.

So keen was Laramie's emotion that he had not been able to remain seated. Clorinde now rose up in her turn, and, in a feeble voice, she began: "Marguerite is lost, sir. I wanted to hide it from you, but as you have seen her, I will tell you the sad truth. She resisted the temptation of Paris as long as she was able, but she could not endure want—"

"Want! what, had she come to that?" gasped Laramie.

"The money she had at her disposal upon her arrival in France

became exhausted," replied the baroness. "She thought that you had deserted her, and then—"

"She listened to some other man!" cried Francis, who was now livid with rage.

Madame de Soumans did not say a word, but she assumed an expression of deep grief, and heaved a prodigious sigh.

"Your silence tells me that I have guessed aright," resumed Laramie. "Now, tell me this man's name. I want to know it, and I want to know where he lives."

"I cannot give you either his name or address, as I am not acquainted with them," responded the baroness.

"Then how is it that you assert that Marguerite—"

"I don't assert anything. I merely draw my conclusions from what I saw, and I do not think that I am mistaken."

"What happened here, then? Speak, I shall have courage enough to hear everything."

"What happened here? Why, nothing—at least not in my presence. You will realise easily enough that at my age, and in my position, I did not often see Mademoiselle Marguerite in the furnished rooms which she occupied in this house. However, I received her whenever she chose to call on me. She even confided her sorrows to me, her worries, her hopes, and I trust that you will believe me when I declare that I always gave her good advice. Towards the end, however, her visits became less frequent. She had made other acquaintances, although she seldom went out—she had got to know some young women, how or where, I cannot say, but she did not hide from me they were not respectable."

At this point Laramie clenched his fists, and gave vent to an oath; which Clorinde graciously took no notice of. "Need I add," she resumed, "that I did all in my power to prevent the dear child from leaving the straight path? Unfortunately, however, the effect of my good advice was, no doubt, destroyed by the talk of other people—that of the frivolous creatures with whom Marguerite had become acquainted. And then want was coming—Parisian misery, the hardest to bear of any."

Laramie stood listening, and choking with emotion.

"I wanted to save her—I offered to assist her a score of times," continued the mendacious baroness, "but she refused. And, finally, the day came when temptation proved too strong for her. She bade me good-bye, in terms which moved my very soul, and then she went off to lead that life of fictitious pleasure, so common in Paris—But she did so out of despair, and will not lead it long; her nature is too proud, she will return to healthier ideas, I feel sure of it; unless, indeed, she dies of shame. And you, sir, you must forgive her, for the poor child did not know what she was doing."

"I now have too much contempt for her, to revenge myself upon her," replied M. Laramie, in a husky voice. "Still I want to see her, and fling the fortune I have made for her in her face. Where

is she? You must know. You must have seen her since she left this house."

" You make a strange mistake, sir," retorted the vidame's friend, with the haughty mien of some great lady who has been mortally offended. " I saw Mademoiselle de Cambremer when she was a poor lonely girl; but I should avert my head, if I met her now-a-days."

" Well, but you must have heard her spoken of, you must know where she goes?"

" The people I associate with don't trouble themselves about girls who have lost caste. You ask me where she goes?—why, she must go to the places, where the women with whom she mainly associates, usually go—to the fashionable restaurants, the Bois de Boulogne, the opera-halls, everywhere in fact where you, no doubt, go, yourself. Oh! you will find her only too easily, and if I may venture to express an opinion upon so delicate a question, I would advise you, sir, not to employ hirelings to search for this poor girl, whom you once loved, and to whom you are, perhaps, still attached."

" You are right, madame," rejoined the Canadian, abruptly, " I shall dismiss all the intriguers who offered to find her, providing I paid them for doing so. I shall act in person."

" I greatly approve of your decision, sir," said Clorinde. " One never ought to employ hirelings in delicate matters of this kind. Allow me to add, that if you will return to me, you will always find me ready to assist you, and, indeed, if Mademoiselle de Cambremer decided to return to the straight path, I would not refuse her a helping hand. She may need one, for, after all that has happened, she will find herself in a very difficult and trying position."

" Oh! she won't need anyone, since she will be rich. And, besides, she will be free to act, and to see whom she pleases. As soon as I have returned her money to her, I sha'n't trouble myself about her any further. Good day, madame," added M. Laramie, walking towards the door.

Clorinde, who was delighted to get rid of her visitor, saw him as far as the landing, and while he was descending the stairs, she returned to her drawing-room where she found Fernande, waiting in a state of great agitation.

" Well, I got out of the mess," exclaimed the baroness, gaily.

" Not very cleverly," rejoined Madame Mireille, shaking her head. " All our schemes are going to the bad. That savage is bound to meet Marguerite some day or other."

" I don't think so," replied Madame de Soumans. " He will hunt for her in places where she never goes. She doesn't drive round the lakes in the Bois de Boulogne of an afternoon, and she doesn't dine at a restaurant—"

" But he may meet her in the street, on the boulevard, just as he did this morning," urged Madame Mireille.

" No, that won't happen again, for I shall tell her not to go out."

" And do you imagine that she will obey your orders?" asked

Fernande, with a sneer. " You don't know much about her character, I must say. You surely don't mean to tell her that her lover is in Paris, so as to prevail upon her to stay indoors ? "

" If I told her that he was looking for her to kill her, she might obey me ; but no—with her disposition, she might like to brave the danger."

" And, besides that, she would no doubt be quite willing to marry that Canadian, providing he gave her the chance. He is a millionaire, and a handsome fellow into the bargain."

" Quite so," opined the baroness. " And I have made up my mind not to tell Margot that I have seen him. We will persuade her that the best thing that she can do is to start for Nice. She is feeling bored here. I learnt as much from Mariette. The season may be a little advanced, still, she can always spend a month in the South of France. I will promise her to superintend the furnishing of the house in the Rue Galilée whilst she's away. It will be ready on her return. She will adopt the suggestion, I feel sure of it, and—this last point concerns you, personally—if you know how to manoeuvre, Madame de Serq will no doubt consent to accompany her young relative on this short trip."

" But what should we gain by all that ? " asked Fernande. " Marguerite would not marry while she's away."

" Why shouldn't she ? If Valbourg is really smitten with her, as I believe he is, he will follow her, never fear. Besides, life at Nice is very favourable to flirtation. The only thing is to acquaint him skilfully with Mademoiselle de Cambremer's approaching departure. One may even let him understand that she will meet with any number of admirers in the South. He will feel nettled on hearing that, and, so as to win this race, the prize of which is the hand of a wealthy and charming Canadian, he will book himself for a sleeping car at once. He is even capable of taking the same train as she does. You will be well rid of him, and whilst he is being united to Marguerite in the bonds of matrimony, you can marry Monsieur de Bolgos in Paris. You will be a countess when Valbourg returns here with his wife ; and if the Canadian should still be here on his arrival, well, they can settle matters between them as they choose. Whatever happens, you will have had your revenge."

" Too great a revenge, perhaps," muttered Fernande.

" What, are you going to pity them ? They don't deserve your compassion, my dear. Valbourg trifled with you, the Canadian is a fool, and Margot doesn't show you any gratitude, for all that you have done for her. No weakness, come. As you, yourself, said just now, we have gone too far to retreat."

" Yes, the die is cast, and yet—"

" What ! scruples ? But I'll take everything on myself. You need merely follow the course of events. If Madame de Serq calls to see you to-day, profit by the opportunity to tell her that Mademoiselle de Cambremer is longing to see the Mediterranean ; and if

the countess speaks of the great affair, if she comes as Monsieur de Bolgos's ambassador, let her do a little begging, just for form's sake, and then finally authorise the count to come and pay his court officially. Owing to the incidents which have occurred, we mustn't delay the finish.

"The more so on account of Marguerite. I don't want to have anything more to do with her," said Fernande.

"Oh ! I will attend to her, my dear," replied the obliging baroness. "Forget her, forget the Canadian, forget Mariette, forget even your old friend, Clorinde, if you like ; merely pay attention to your Galician nobleman, and marry him as soon as possible. Now, I must attend to business, so go home, but call again to-morrow to tell me that your marriage is to come off as soon as possible. Your wedding day will be the happiest of my life ! I told you so before !"

Madame Mireille could not help smiling at the baroness's enthusiasm, and yet, to tell the truth, she did not feel particularly gay. She was beginning to realise all the difficulties of the situation, which was fast becoming more and more complicated, and she almost regretted that she had lent a willing ear to Madame de Soumans' advice.

"Well, till to-morrow," she said, keeping her reflections to herself. However, as she went towards the door, accompanied by the baroness, who was affectionately holding her hand, she abruptly asked, "By the way, who is that Monsieur de Sartilly whom I heard you speak about to the Canadian ?"

"One of my old friends," answered Clorinde, affecting an easy air. "There is a good deal of play at his house, and sometimes he invites me. It was there that I met that Canadian savage. But I sha'n't see him there again, I can assure you of that. My fortune is made, my dear Fernande, and I shall be indebted to you for it. But I will tell you the whole story the next time you call."

Madame Mireille did not insist on the subject. The Baroness de Soumans' private affairs had no particular interest for her, the more so as she had other cares to think of. She felt that the course of her future life would shortly be decided.

VI.

WHILST Fernande was conferring with Madame de Soumans, at the very moment, indeed, when the young widow was deciding that she would persevere in her schemes of revenge, Jacques Valbourg was walking about his rooms reflecting upon his own plans. Everything there seemed to remind him of Madame Mireille—the furniture, the curios, the many little trifles scattered here and there, which she had touched. It even seemed to Valbourg that the carpet retained the imprint of her tiny, high-heeled shoes. Her favourite perfume still clung to the arm-chair in which she was wont to sit, and Jacques could still picture her leaning back in her habitual position. Then, near by, there stood the little Chinese-lacquered table, on which they had sometimes taken tea together, seated in front of one another, and gazing into each other's eyes. There, too, was the piano on which Fernande had oft-time played the airs he was fond of hearing—nothing noisy, nothing extremely difficult, none of those wonderful compositions, the execution of which requires on the pianist's part a truly juggler-like agility, nor any of those vulgar tunes which send the patrons of music-halls and operettas into raptures. No, Fernande played some quiet, dreamy piece by Schubert or Chopin, and now and again some *aria* by Bellini or Rossini. He, Valbourg, stood behind her whilst her tapering fingers glided over the key-board, and when she had finished, both intoxicated by the soft harmony she had awakened, their lips would meet in loving kisses.

The memories of the past now crowded upon him, and his anger became intense as he recalled that meeting, only the night before, in the box at the Variétés, when she had remained so cold and disdainful, whereas his heart had beaten more rapidly and loudly as soon as he had set eyes upon her. "She treated me as she would have treated a stranger," he muttered between his teeth. "I should have been a fool, indeed, had I consented to marry her, for she never loved me. Otherwise, she would have softened when she saw me yesterday. We were alone—one word, a mere gesture, would have been sufficient. I should have given way, no doubt. But no! she did not display the slightest sensibility—there was not the faintest gleam in her eyes. You would have thought that she was made of marble. Well, after all, I don't care; only, I mean to be pitiless."

Thereupon, Valbourg began thinking of the two persons who were to assist him unwittingly in his work of revenge. He recalled the charming young girl whom a happy chance had brought to the theatre, and who seemed quite disposed to listen to a serious proposal, that is, judging by the manner in which she had accepted his first compliments. She was very rich, as she was about to establish herself in Paris in grand style, and the patronage of the Countess de Serq was a sufficient guarantee that her birth and her antecedents were honourable.

No doubt, she would have plenty of suitors, but he, Jacques, possessed the advantage of being the first afield. It was only a question of keeping up the acquaintance steadily and improving it; and Madame de Serq would no doubt be willing to second the efforts of a candidate who seemed to have won her confidence and sympathy at first sight, and who, moreover, possessed both an ample fortune and an excellent footing in society.

"Yes, I have a perfect right to go and see the old lady," muttered Valbourg, "and I *will* go to see her to-morrow."

Then his thoughts abruptly reverted to the Count de Bolgos, who had so readily fallen in with his views when he had spoken to him about Madamo Mireille, and who was so much to the latter's taste, that she did not take any trouble to hide it. In this direction, everything was progressing most favourably. At the Opera masquerade, M. de Bolgos had confessed to his friend, Valbourg, that he meant to make a formal request for the pretty widow's hand, having been visibly encouraged to do so by her looks and her language alike.

However, there was still a black speck on the horizon of Valbourg's schemes. The feats of the gang, which worked on behalf of that noble bandit, Bolgos, had attracted the attention of the police. The leader of the band was being searched for, and he might be discovered at any moment. Justin must know something of all this, and Valbourg meant to ask him for an explanation as to his presence both at the theatre and the ball.

Now, Justin, whose duty it was to wait upon his master when the latter rose, and who was usually punctuality personified, had not shown himself that day, and yet it was already two o'clock in the afternoon. Valbourg had been compelled to proceed with his toilet, unassisted, and nobody had been able to give him any information about his valet, who did not sleep in the rooms of the flat. The housekeeper, who did duty as cook, had just served breakfast, and in answer to her master's inquiries, she could not say what had become of Justin. The doorkeeper, whom she had questioned, had not seen anything of him since the day before.

This prolonged absence on Justin's part really worried Valbourg, and he was beginning to think that the rascal must be playing a double game; but, all of a sudden, he heard a rap at the door, and having answered, "Come in," he beheld the tardy delinquent cross the threshold.

Justin looked embarrassed, and in lieu of his usual garments, he wore a black frock-coat and grey trousers, with a pin in his scarf and kid gloves on his hands. This change in his attire was not calculated to set Valbourg at his ease. "Where have you come from?" he asked, impatiently, "and why have you dressed yourself like that?"

"I have come to ask you to let me leave your service, sir," replied Justin, in a tone which was at once firm and respectful.

"What, you think of leaving me?" said Valbourg, with some little surprise.

"I know that my fate is in your hands, sir," rejoined the valet, "that you can ruin me if you choose, and that I, no doubt, deserve to be handed over to the authorities. Still, I am also aware that you have a kind heart, sir, and I pray you to let me explain the situation in which I find myself."

"It seems to me that you have a great many things to explain, and you have done right to return here, for I was thinking of setting the police upon your track," said Valbourg.

"Oh! They would not have had any trouble to find me," protested Justin, "I have never thought of hiding myself, any more than I have thought of going abroad without your permission, sir."

"Going abroad!" exclaimed Valbourg, "where do you think of going, then?"

"To America or Australia: as far away as possible; somewhere where I shall have the chance of becoming an honest man again," said the valet.

"And is Monsieur de Bolgos to pay your passage?"

"Oh, no, sir! I don't need any one's help. If I chose I could enter the service of a wealthy foreigner, who has offered to make my fortune for me. But I sha'n't avail myself of his proposal. I have enough money to do without him."

"Enough money? How have you got hold of it, then?" asked Jacques.

"Oh! I haven't stolen it, sir. I won it at play." And as Valbourg made a gesture of disbelief, Justin added: "I see that you fancy I am telling an untruth, sir, and, indeed, everything that happened to me last night really seems incredible. Still, it is all the same quite true, for the foreigner, whom I just spoke to you about, took me to a gambling-house where I won no less than ninety thousand francs. He would certify the truth of my statements if you chose to question him."

"Were you with him at the masquerade ball when I met you there?"

"Yes, sir, and I heard what Monsieur de Bolgos said to you and what you answered him."

"That I intended to follow his advice and dismiss you, eh?"

"He had his reasons for advising you to do that, sir," answered Justin. "He suspects that I have betrayed him, and he would like to have me in his clutches again. But I would rather die than,

fall into his power, and, besides—it is time for you to know it—he will soon be captured."

"Have you denounced him, then?" eagerly inquired Valbourg. He was afraid that Justin might have upset his plans by some imprudent step.

"No, sir, I haven't," answered the valet, "but I should have done so, I confess it, if you hadn't continued seeing him; for he fills me with positive horror. Oh! I don't presume to judge your conduct, sir. But it is my duty to warn you of what is going on. One of the scamps he employs, has no doubt written to the police, for I saw several detectives at the theatre, and I feel sure that they were watching him. But he is so cunning! No one, not even you, sir, noticed that he spoke to that rascal who was prowling about."

"Do you mean the fellow whom you pointed out to me when you were in the gallery at the Variétés?"

"Yes, sir, that was the chap; and the whole band was at the opera ball also. Monsieur de Bolgos gave the leader a written order under your very nose. Don't you remember the masqueraders who assembled just below your box? And the five-franc piece wrapped in paper which the count threw into the cap of a fellow dressed as a troubadour?"

"Ah! yes, I remember that."

"Well, in that paper, Monsieur de Bolgos called the attention of the scamps to the foreigner whom I was with. And, in proof of what I say, they followed us from the ball, and when we left the gambling house at five o'clock they sprang upon us."

"And robbed the foreigner of his money?" asked Valbourg whom the story began to interest.

"No; he had just lost all the cash he had about him. And as for me they didn't search me, for they knew who and what I was. Their master had, no doubt, told them not to touch the servant. They said as much in my presence; so we escaped without any loss. However, my companion was very badly treated and he has entered a complaint against the scamps. They will certainly be captured, they will make revelations in the hope of being less severely punished, and then Monsieur de Bolgos will be arrested. So you see, sir, it was high time for me to warn you."

Valbourg, who was by no means deficient in self-possession, put a good face upon the matter; still, he immediately realised that he must change his tactics. It was becoming dangerous to associate with M. de Bolgos, and the time had come to drop the connection in a quiet way. Still, this was no reason why Madame Mireille should do the same. She knew nothing, she looked upon M. de Bolgos as a man of unimpeachable honour, and if she made up her mind to marry him there would be no one to warn her of the folly of her conduct, no one to cry out in time "*Breakers ahead!*" Besides, it was not certain that the count would be apprehended at once; and but little time is necessary to complete the various matrimonial formalities, customary in France.

"What should you do if Monsieur de Bolgos were arrested?" now coldly asked Valbourg, giving his valet a keen glance.

"I should do whatever you ordered me to do, sir," replied Justin, in a tone of voice which left no doubt as to his sincerity. "If you require it I will go and give myself up as being his accomplice. Still, if you will allow me to leave France, I swear that you shall never hear of me again."

"I have that written declaration of yours in which you confess having tried to rob me."

"By Monsieur de Bolgos's orders? Yes, sir, I know that. And there is nothing to prevent your using that declaration, even if you consent to let me leave France. If you give me the permission I ask for, I will start to-morrow, and once abroad I shall change my name. I sha'n't be troubled by the condemnation by default of a valet named Justin."

Valbourg was now beginning to soften. He said to himself that Justin might easily have absconded without asking permission, and that his conversion must be a sincere one, since of his own free will he had come to place himself at his master's discretion. Now, all that was worthy of being taken into account. Besides, Valbourg had no great interest in detaining this servant in Paris. If the hour of vengeance struck as he anticipated, the letter from Bolgos to his accomplice would suffice to prove to Fernande what manner of man her husband was. In fact, it was even better that Justin should not be dragged before the Assizes with the other rascals, for, plied with questions by the examining magistrate, he might confess that his master had known all along that the count was a thorough scoundrel. Now, Valbourg, as will be readily conceived, was by no means anxious to figure, even indirectly, in a "celebrated case," which would prove the greatest and most astonishing Parisian scandal of the times.

"Well, let it be so," said he at last; "I shall inform Monsieur de Bolgos that I have dismissed you, and he won't be surprised to hear so, as he himself advised me to adopt that course. But don't you think that he will try to injure you in some way if you don't go to take his orders?"

"He'll have a look for me, perhaps," said Justin, "but he won't find me. I have taken proper measures so as to escape him. However, he won't escape from the police—that is, unless he's warned; and, excuse me for referring to the subject again, sir, but if, to avoid any stir that might prove unpleasant to yourself, you preferred to see him decamp, why then, no matter how I hate him, I will arrange to send him a warning which would certainly make him take to his heels. Oh! I shouldn't call on him, I don't want to see him, but I would write to him."

"No! I don't do that," rejoined Valbourg, "that matter concerns me, and I will attend to it when I consider that the right moment has come. There is no great hurry about it, I imagine. Monsieur de Bolgos may be denounced, but the police will think twice before

they arrest him. Besides, I presume that he has foreseen such an eventuality, and taken certain precautions."

"I don't know, sir," replied Justin, shaking his head. "However, if I were still his hireling, I shouldn't lose any time in crossing the frontier. And, even in my present situation, I prefer renouncing everything rather than remaining in Paris. For instance, the foreigner I just spoke to you about offered me a very large sum of money to render him a service, which I might easily do, and yet, rather than stay here to try and win the reward, I prefer placing myself in safety."

"Then leave France. I sha'n't prevent your doing so. And as you now inspire me with a certain amount of confidence, I want you to give me a frank answer to a question which I am about to put to you. Have you ever mentioned to anyone whatever what took place here on the evening when I surprised you in the gallery just as you had abstracted the bank-notes?"

"No, sir, I have never mentioned it to anyone," replied Justin. "Besides, it would have been equivalent to denouncing myself. I should have been mad had I done such a thing."

"Oh, I feel sure that you didn't say anything about it to Monsieur de Bolgos. But didn't you speak to anyone else? To one of those rascals whom he employs, for instance? You know them, since you just mentioned to me that they were at the opera ball last night?"

"I know them by sight, having seen them as they were entering or leaving the house in the Rue Jean Gougon by the little side door. The valet who has taken my situation there, lets them in. He belongs to the gang. However, I have never spoken to them. I was expressly forbidden to hold any communication with them. Monsieur de Bolgos reserved me for work of another kind."

"I understand. You are not strongly built enough to attack passers-by in the streets, and you were only to thieve indoors. The word hurts your feelings, I see, but there is none other applicable to the opening of a safe with a false key."

"I don't complain, sir," murmured Justin, "I deserve that you should treat me so. Only I beg of you to believe that you alone know what I did, and that if you continue keeping the affair secret I sha'n't be the one to noise it abroad."

"You wouldn't even tell it to your sweetheart? for you have one, I know that. When I made inquiries about you, not seeing you this morning at the usual hour, I was told that you were in love with a lady's maid living in the neighbourhood."

"I don't deny that, sir, but the girl you speak of doesn't at all belong to Monsieur de Bolgos's band; and I should never tell her that I had rendered myself liable to be arrested at any moment. A man doesn't make confessions of that kind to a woman, unless the woman be his accomplice. Besides, as you are willing to let me leave France, that connection will now come to an end."

All this was said so frankly, that Valbourg felt quite reassured.

"All right," said he, "you are no longer in my service, and you can retire. Still, I must see you again before you leave Paris. I may have some instructions to give you."

"I will call for them to-morrow, sir, on the day after to-morrow, whenever you please, in fact ; and I will comply with them, no matter what they may be." Having spoken these words, Justin bowed respectfully, and left the room.

His master did not detain him. He now knew enough, and had no time to lose in carrying out certain resolutions which he had arrived at. He had decided, for instance, to call upon Madame de Serq, to speak to her at length respecting the charms of her beautiful cousin, and to ask her whether he might hope that Mademoiselle de Cambremer would authorise him to pay court to her with a view to matrimony.

As for the Count de Bolgos, before breaking off all intercourse with him, Valbourg wished to find out how the adventurer was situated as regards Madame Mireille, and to govern his conduct accordingly. He did not consider that the position of affairs was, as yet, perilous, and, for the time being, he merely meant to keep the count slightly at a distance without altogether breaking off the intercourse. He was, in fact, anxious to see him for a few moments as soon as possible, so as to ascertain the result of the visit paid by the Countess de Serq to Madame Mireille—the visit which Bolgos had pre-announced at the masquerade ball.

Now, it was almost certain that Bolgos would come to the club between five and seven, and there was a little sitting-room there, well adapted for a private chat. However, it was now barely three o'clock, and Valbourg felt that a walk would do him good, and refresh his ideas to begin with. He accordingly dressed, and proceeded on foot to the Champs Elysées.

The weather was mild, and the avenue was thronged with carriages conveying opulent ladies of fashion, and dashing "irregulars" to the usual drive in the Bois de Boulogne. On the right hand side, too, the pathways were crowded with promenaders, who had come to see and to be seen. Valbourg vaguely hoped that he might come across Monsieur de Bolgos here. However, a man is never so much alone as when he is lost in a crowd, and solitude propitiates reflection ; so, while busily cogitating, Valbourg strolled as far as the Rond-Point, without having met the count, and he was returning towards the Place de la Concorde smoking a cigar, when, just in front of the Palais de l'Industrie, he found himself face to face with Sornac the universal reporter, whom he had met, on the previous evening, in the passage at the Théâtre des Variétés.

Valbourg's first impulse was to try and avoid the journalist, but he promptly recollected that Sornac was a mine of information ; and, besides, the gay fellow came straight forward and exclaimed without the slightest ceremony : " You will remember that I promised you last night that the story should be continued in the next

number, that is to-day. Well, I have brought you the continuation and you will be the first to hear it. You can repeat it, by the way, to that dear count who chaffed me so much yesterday evening."

"What affair are you alluding to?" asked Valbourg, assuming an easy air, but, in reality, experiencing great emotion.

"Well," rejoined Sornac, "if you don't mind walking in my direction for five minutes or so, I will tell you a story which will soon be the talk of all Paris, though no one knows anything about it as yet. I would stay here with you and tell it quietly, only I'm in a hurry. There has been an attempt at murder in the Rue du Colysée, and a suicide in the Rue Balzac; I must find out all about them—"

"Oh! I'll willingly walk part of your way with you. I merely came out for a stroll, and I shall be delighted to hear your story," responded Valbourg.

"You won't waste your time, I can tell you that. It's a very curious affair. It seems that the arrest of the leader of the gang of footpads, which I spoke to you about last night, wasn't effected at the Variétés after all. The detectives didn't notice any suspicious goings-on there. However, on the boulevard their attention was attracted by three or four scamps whom they followed after the performance, and who went—you will never guess where?"

"Oh! I don't think that anyone would guess that," said Valbourg.

"Well, they went to the ball at the grand Opera-House, in full masquerade costume."

"Why, what is there so extraordinary about that? Folks of the kind you mention don't usually go to the Opera-House in evening dress; and besides, my dear fellow, to tell you the truth, I don't quite understand why you tell me all this. How can these masqueraders have anything to do with that story of a bandit chief who goes into society?"

"Wait a minute, you shall see," replied Sornac. "The detectives came to the conclusion that these scamps had not gone to the Opera-House to try and attack the people going away. There is too much of a crowd round about the place on those occasions, and nocturnal attacks are hardly to be feared. However, the detectives had seen these fellows enter a house on the outer boulevards, to dress, and they thus found out the residence of one of the four rogues, and with that clue felt certain that they would be able to find them all again, if need were. And, in point of fact, it didn't take long."

"What! have these fellows been arrested?" asked Valbourg.

"Well, at nine o'clock this morning a foreigner called on the chief of the detective service and told him that at five o'clock, while passing along the Rue Mogador with one of his friends, he had been waylaid, searched and half strangled by some individuals of whom he gave a full description. One of them was disguised as a village bride, another as a rural guard, and another as a troubadour. There

was no possibility of any mistake—they were the very fellows whom the police had noticed on the previous evening. At ten the bride and the troubadour were arrested at home. At noon the bride decided to make some revelations, and the troubadour followed his companion's example. They have related the most astounding things to the police. It seems that there are a dozen of them—some who attack winning gamesters at night time in the streets, and others who thieve in the houses where their leader has secured them situations as servants—for there is a leader, that is certain now, and, what is more, this leader is a man moving in the best society. There has been nothing like it since the famous affair of the 'band in dress coats,' which was tried at the Assizes in the time of Louis Philippe."

"And is this leader's name known?" asked Valbourg, whose motion had now reached a climax.

"Not yet. The fellows refused to name him, imagining, no doubt, that he will be able to get them out of their scrape, thanks to his influence and high connections. All they would admit was that he was present at the *Variétés* last night. What a fine article I should have been able to write if the police had only arrested him there!"

"And are these fellows likely to name their leader eventually?" inquired Valbourg.

"Of course they will. They have begun to make revelations and they will go on to the end. It's always like that. The only question is whether they will take long about it. If the matter isn't managed expeditiously, you see the leader may find out what is going on and decamp. Of course there are the extradition treaties, but this fellow must be a cute one, and if once he gets abroad he won't let himself be caught. In any case he will be tried and sentenced by default. What a trial it will be, my dear fellow! We have plenty of scandal ahead of us."

"However, so far, the police haven't any clue to this man's identity?" said Valbourg, who having recovered his self-possession, was anxious to extract as much information as possible from Sornac in view of combining a plan of action.

"It seems certain that he belongs to some big club—one where very high play goes on."

"That's natural enough, since his system apparently is to instruct his hirelings to attack the members who have won large amounts. To do that he must naturally know the victims."

"Yes, that's how he pointed out Monsieur de Nancras who was plundered the other day; and as Nancras belongs to your club, it is surmised that the leader of this gang must also be a member of it."

"That doesn't follow," objected Valbourg. "All heavy players have a notoriety in club-land: The members of one club know what goes on in another. And if that leader is a skilful fellow he wouldn't single out the people whom he meets every evening."

"At all events Monsieur de Nancras will be brought face to face with the scamps who have been arrested, and, perhaps, he will be able to recognise them."

"And he will tell the story all over the place!" remarked Valbourg shrugging his shoulders. "That isn't the way to discover this mysterious bandit chief. He will be warned; and he will take his precautions accordingly. It seems to me that absolute secrecy is necessary to ensure success."

"No doubt. And the information was only given to me on conditions that I kept it back for two or three days. The paper will merely announce that some night prowlers have been arrested. The prisoners' revelations won't be mentioned, nor will anything be said about the organization of the gang. We don't want to hamper the police in their work. However, as soon as the leader is found, we shall be the first to relate the whole affair. In the meanwhile I rely upon you not to noise the story about. You can tell it to the Count de Bolgos, if you like, but not to anybody else. Your clubs are always full of chatterers."

"I sha'n't even mention the affair to Bolgos," said Valbourg.

"Oh! there's no objection to your telling it to *him*, and in fact if I met him I should tell it him at once. He wouldn't believe what I said last night at the theatre, and in fact he chaffed me a bit. But he will now see that it's serious, and that I am not a humbug, as he may have supposed. However, here we are at the Rond Point, and I won't take you all the way to the Rue Balzac. Thanks for seeing me so far, and till we meet again!"

With these words Sorniac relinquished Valbourg's arm, which he had appropriated whilst walking, and dived into the crowd.

This short chat had thrown Valbourg into dire perplexity. It was now evident that the decisive moment was approaching, and one of two courses might be followed—he might either warn Bolgos, or else remain silent. If the count were warned he would probably at once make off, so as to place himself in safety, and Valbourg would then be spared the unpleasantness of witnessing the arrest and trial of a man who had been his boon companion for three weeks past. However, in that case all his schemes would fly away in smoke. Besides, no matter what he did, he could scarcely hope now that Madame Mireille would have time to marry before the bomb exploded.

Everything considered, he was of opinion that it would be best to let events take their course, and devote his energies to winning the good graces of Mademoiselle de Cambremer, who fortunately had nothing to do with the other affair. Revenge, sweet revenge, was still possible. Marguerite was both charming and wealthy, and Fernande would wither away with jealousy, if she learnt that her ex-lover was about to marry that adorable and opulent Canadian beauty.

Valbourg having thus decided to give the preference to his matrimonial plans, slowly wended his way towards the club. It

would hardly be of any use for him to call upon Madame de Serq that afternoon, as the countess was to visit Fernande, upon Monsieur de Bolgos's behalf ; and on the other hand he, Valbourg, wished to see Bolgos for a moment, if only to learn if Madame Mireille had replied to his overtures. Moreover, there is always a deal of news to be picked up at a club, and Valbourg felt anxious to know whether there was, so far, any rumour abroad as to the arrest of a band of thieves whose leader was a man moving in good society. He would not have been at all surprised to hear the story repeated in a dozen directions, for he had no confidence whatever in Sornac's discretion, believing the journalist quite capable of repeating his narrative to all the acquaintances he met. And as Sornac had a most extensive circle of acquaintance, he must have had plenty of opportunities for indulging in "the harebrained chatter of irresponsible frivolity," merely whilst walking the remainder of the way up the Champs Elysées.

It was about five o'clock when Valbourg reached his club where he found a large number of members—not the same set, however, as he was accustomed to meet whenever he dropped in after going to the theatre, for there are day clubmen and night clubmen. At night gay "fast liver" abound, indulging in the fascinating delights of baccarat ; whilst in the afternoon members of a quieter disposition are to be met, those who like to play a simple game of whist or piquet before their dinner. There are, moreover, the people who like to "con" the newspapers, and the economical idlers who obtain the luxuries of lights and firing virtually gratis, at their club.

When Valbourg arrived, these various classes of members were all represented. The reading room was full ; and in the large red saloon there were eight card tables occupied, whilst round about the fireplace a dozen lazy fellows were lolling back in their arm-chairs, some of them chatting, others meditating, and others again taking an afternoon nap. Farther on, in the billiard room, a crowd was gathered round the various tables and some lively betting was in progress. Valbourg strolled through the various rooms, passing the members present in review, and exchanging a few remarks with those he knew, but without hearing anything of interest. Monsieur de Bolgos was not there, and indeed Valbourg did not expect to see him there so early, though he felt fairly certain that he would eventually turn up.

He accordingly repaired to a little room where they were in the habit of meeting whenever they wanted to have a quiet chat—a room communicating with the red saloon, and furnished with divans. It was provided also with swinging glass-doors, so that one could keep an eye on the players or chatterers in the saloon without being inconvenienced by the buzz of conversation.

Valbourg sat down on one of the well padded divans, in front of the door, and he did not have long to wait, for at a quarter to six o'clock, he saw the Count de Bolgos crossing the red saloon, and

approaching the little *buen retiro* where he, Valbourg, had ensconced himself. The count speedily caught sight of his friend through the glass-door and at once hastened to him. "My dear fellow," he exclaimed, pressing Valbourg's hand, with an air of friendly affection. "I am delighted to find you here, for I want you to be the first to learn a piece of news which all Paris will be acquainted with to-morrow."

"What is it?" inquired Valbourg, who felt somewhat puzzled by this preamble.

"I am the happiest man in the world. Madame Mireille has consented to become my wife!"

"What! is it settled?" exclaimed Valbourg, greatly moved.

"Yes, my dear fellow," replied Bolgos, "the Countess de Serq was gracious enough to act as my ambassador, and Madame Mireille accepted my proposal at once. It astonishes you, eh?"

"Oh! no. I had foreseen it. Madame Mireille spoke of you to me in terms which—"

"Which were altogether too flattering, I have no doubt of it," interrupted the count, "for my own part I had half guessed that she was not averse to marrying me; still, I did not dare to hope that she would come to a decision so promptly. Of course the pecuniary questions remain to be settled and we sha'n't marry without everything being fully understood. Still the marriage is decided upon in principle. I am authorized to pay my court and I shall begin doing so to-morrow. Need I add, my dear fellow, that this marriage answers all my hopes? I was talking to you only yesterday about my future plans. Madame Mireille is the very woman I dreamt of, and I really regret that I did not think of her, before. However, we are now going to make up for lost time. Everything will be promptly settled."

"Is the wedding-day already fixed?" inquired Valbourg, forcing back his emotion.

"Oh! not yet, but I expect that we shall be married in a month from now. I can't say, of course, until I have had a chat with Madame Mireille. And, besides, our notaries must come to an understanding about the terms of the contract. It is true that will be an easy matter, as I shall tell my notary to do whatever Madame Mireille may desire. My fortune is easily counted up. It consists of state bonds, shares in the Bank of France and City of Paris stock. I don't mention my house in the Rue Jean Gougon, and a large estate in Hungary. Madame Mireille's position is very similar to mine, at least so the countess tells me. Apart from her mansion in the Rue de Lisbonne, her property consists of stocks and shares."

These last words were spoken in a questioning tone as Valbourg remarked. He even guessed why Bolgos was anxious to learn how Fernande's fortune was invested. House-property was not so much to his liking as he, no doubt, foresaw that some accident might compel him to leave France. Perhaps, indeed, when once the wed-

ding was over, he meant to abscond with his wife's dowry in his pockets. It would be a fitting finish to his nefarious career.

"I don't know what investments Madame Mireillo may have made of recent years," said Valbourg, "but I know that on the death of her first husband she came into possession of money yielding her an income of between sixty and eighty thousand francs, which must have increased as she has always been a prudent woman, although living up to her position."

"Then I am richer than she is," rejoined M. de Bolgos, smiling, "and I am delighted to find that out, for no one will be able to accuse me of marrying for money. But it seems to me, my dear fellow, that I have talked enough about my own happiness. Let us have a chat about yours. How are you getting on as regards Mademoiselle de Cambremer?"

"Matters are still at the same point as they were when we took leave of the ladies at the corner of the Rue Vivienne?" said Valbourg. "You surely don't imagine that I called upon the young lady this morning?"

"No, certainly not. I only ask whether you still intend to carry matters to the point?"

"It will depend upon circumstances," replied Valbourg, evasively. He did not care to take M. de Bolgos into his confidence any further.

"Well, Madame de Serq has again assured me that you would have a great chance of succeeding, providing you only made a few advances. Mademoiselle de Cambremer is an American, remember, so that she is rather partial to a little boldness. I know what I should do if I wished to make a conquest of her."

"What should you do, pray?" asked Valbourg, inquisitively.

"Well, just the contrary of what I have done as regards Madame Mireille, who is a Frenchwoman, and a believer in social usages. I shouldn't have recourse to an ambassadress. I should go straight—and alone—to the Hotel Bristol and simply say: 'Mademoiselle, I love you and I ardently wish to marry you?' Will you take me for your husband?" I am convinced that if *you* did that, Mademoiselle de Cambremer would answer 'yes.' And then I should congratulate you on your good fortune, for she is very charming and possesses a handsome fortune; at least so Madame de Serq told me. She spoke of five hundred thousand francs in cash, besides large estates which might be made to yield a handsome income."

Valbourg was about to protest his disinterestedness, which was certainly far more sincere than that of M. de Bolgos, but their chat was at this moment interrupted. Two members of the club, whom they both knew very well, entered the little room; one of them flourishing a newspaper and gesticulating as if he were surprised by something he had read in it. The count who had seen them cross the red saloon was quite prepared to give them a cold reception, for he felt annoyed to find his chat with Valbourg interrupted just as it was becoming interesting.

"We have been looking for you everywhere," now said one of the new-comers. "I have bet my friend, Versoix, ten louis that the young person whom you were with last night at the Variétés isn't a foreigner at all, but simply Madame Mireille's niece."

"You have lost them, my dear Nancras," replied M. de Bolgos. "That young girl is in no way related to Madame Mireille. And, as Versoix says, she is a foreigner. She comes from Canada."

"Ah! I knew I was right!" exclaimed Versoix, who, like his companion, was a fine specimen of the young Parisian "masher." "She must be that Mademoiselle de Cambremer, who is the richest heiress of the new world."

"She is, no doubt, rich, but you exaggerate matters," responded the Count de Bolgos.

"Not at all. Her wealth may be of recent date, but, all the same, it is incalculable. Here is a Quebec newspaper, which is full of information about the wonderful discovery of I don't know how many petroleum springs in the vicinity of the Red River. It is the great news of the day across the Atlantic; and the paper states that the land on which the discovery has been made belongs to an orphan girl of French origin, who left Canada a year or two ago to come to Paris, where she must still be staying. But read the article, my dear count. It is called 'A Million Pounds Sterling,' and the name of Mademoiselle Marguerite de Cambremer is given in full. The writer adds that her exact whereabouts are not known, and that the Governor-General of Canada has requested the English ambassador here to try and communicate with the fortunate possessor of this subterraneous fortune."

M. de Bolgos took the newspaper which Versoix held out to him, read the article, and then remarked: "This is one of the finest hoaxes that ever saw the light in America."

However, whilst he said this, Valbourg fancied that his looks belied his words.

"What! don't you believe in it?" remarked Versoix.

"Not at all," said the count. "In the first place, Mademoiselle de Cambremer did not leave Canada a year ago, for she hasn't been here longer than a month at the very most. Secondly, she doesn't know a word of this story, and if any petroleum springs had been found on her estates, she would certainly have been the first person to hear of it, whatever this paper may say to the contrary."

"After all, you are perhaps right. Newspaper men are such arrant liars, as a rule; and, besides, it's all the same to me, as I have won my bet. You owe me ten louis, Nancras."

"Oh! I'd willingly give you a hundred to be introduced to that petroleum queen!" exclaimed the other masher. "It would suit me to marry her, for I shall never get back the twenty-two thousand francs which I was plundered of the other night at the corner of the Rue de Berry. The thieves have just been caught, but my money hasn't been found."

"What!" exclaimed the Count de Bolgos, "have the scamps

been captured ? Tell me all about it. Sornac mentioned your mis-adventure to me, but I didn't believe what he said."

"Oh ! you never believe anything, my dear count. All the same, I have just come from the Prefecture of Police, where I was summoned to interview a couple of rascals who were arrested this morning on returning from the Opera House ball. They were in masquerade costume, and I'm sure that I couldn't recognise them, for they began by half strangling me before they searched me. However, it seems that they have confessed. This can't interest you, as you haven't been plundered, but here I have just lost another ten louis, and I must try to get them back. Come, Versoix, leave your paper, and come and have a game of *écarté*."

Thereupon the two "mashers" retired, altogether ignorant of the effect they had produced.

Valbourg was quite out of countenance. Everything would be changed if the Canadian newspaper told the truth. A man cannot propose point-blank and on such short notice to a girl possessed of almost fabulous wealth, and he, Valbourg, could no longer aspire to Mademoiselle de Cambremer's hand under penalty of being accused of mercenary designs. Besides, under such altered circumstances, he would have no chance of being accepted. Thus, one half of his vengeance apparently escaped him. On the other hand, the information which Sornac had so readily supplied in the Champs Elysées had just been confirmed by M. de Nancras, and there seemed little likelihood of Fernande marrying the count, as the latter would probably be arrested before the wedding-day arrived.

As for M. de Bolgos, although he had listened with an air of disdainful indifference to the instructive chatter of the two young swells who had made a bet about Mademoiselle de Cambremer's nationality, he had, no doubt, made a careful note of it. At least, so Valbourg surmised, and, in all probability, correctly, for the count's manner was no longer the same ; and, moreover, his language underwent a most decided change. "This news seems to me to be most fantastic," he remarked. "Still, don't you think that it would be advisable to make some inquiries as to its authenticity. Nothing that relates to Mademoiselle de Cambremer can be indifferent to you. Suppose you went to the English Embassy to-morrow to inquire."

"Oh ! I certainly sha'n't do that !" exclaimed Valbourg, almost indignantly.

"Then I'll go. I am not a suitor for her hand. It will be more fitting, and I will give you full information to-morrow. Now, I must ask permission to leave you for an hour. I have an appointment at my house. However, we will dine here together."

So saying, the Count de Bolgos rose up and left the room, leaving Valbourg very perplexed and agitated. "What does he mean to do ?" soliloquised Madame Mireille's whilom lover. "And what shall I do if all my schemes for revenging myself upon Fernande fall through ?"

VII.

MARIETTE had guessed correctly, and, for the matter of that, Parisian lady's-maids always do guess aright. Mademoiselle de Cambremor felt bored. The first days following upon her change of fortune had seemed very pleasant to her. She had felt born anew to life, as it were. No more long hours of sad reverie behind the window curtains. No more solitary repasts. She occupied a nice suite of rooms overlooking the Place Vendôme, full of fresh air and sunshine. She lunched in a luxurious dining-hall, where the strangers passing to and fro amused her. She mainly went out in a carriage, an elegant livery-stable brougham, so well appointed that it might have passed for a private equipage ; still, now and then, she started on foot to go off "shopping," spending long hours dawdling in those vast repositories—the Louvre, the Printemps, and the Bon Marché. Moreover, Margot, little Margot of the Rue du Rocher, often entered the stylish jewellery shops of the boulevards, and she patronised a renowned man-milliner in the Rue de la Paix.

However, she felt even more satisfaction at resuming her position in the social circles in which she had been born, and for which she had evidently been intended, for she conducted herself as if she had never lived elsewhere. The reception granted to her by the Countess de Serq had once more raised her in her own esteem. The old lady's friends all treated her with marked cordiality and favour. They all seemed anxious to find a husband for this charming girl descended from one of the oldest French-Canadian families. And as for the handsome scions of the aristocratic Faubourg St. Germain, attracted as much by Marguerite's beauty as by her fortune, they flocked to the countess's residence, which they had barely patronised prior to the young girl's arrival. All this was charming, and Marguerite basked in present enjoyment, without remembering the past or feeling a care as to the future.

However, the awakening came soon and suddenly. She realised that the countess, worthy woman though she was, had certain views concerning her, and was putting her so as to persuade her to marry some young fellow of orthodox royalist opinions. But, as it happened, all the noble bachelors who were thus introduced to her, disgusted her with their grand airs. The man whom she had loved had been proud and free ; he had entertained the greatest contempt for hypocrites, and for so-called fine manners.

Besides this, the life that Marguerite led displeased her in various senses. In America she had been able to live as she pleased without anyone making remark, but here, in Paris, it was different ; and Marguerite plainly realised that a certain amount of mistrust lingered beneath the respectful manner in which she was waited upon at the hotel. She had been accommodated there because she had at once given the Countess de Serq as her reference ; and she was treated like a person who has respectable connections and who conducts herself in all propriety. Still the managers and the servants were somewhat astonished that she, an unmarried young girl, should remain living at a hotel. The "Bristol" is a very aristocratic and select establishment be it remembered ; it enjoys the patronage of royalty, the Prince of Wales invariably staying there whenever he visits Paris, as he does at least two or three times every year.

However, all this was comparatively nothing, but Marguerite had reflected since the day when she had accepted the baroness's proposals, without reserve or after-thought. On the day when Clorinde came to her, with her hands full of enticing offers, Margot, tired of waiting and suffering, did not for a moment hesitate. She did not even ask herself what object there could be in bringing her out in this style ; she plunged into the unknown with her eyes shut.

Her excitable nature frequently made her commit such acts of folly ; and just as she had ofttime regretted her conduct in Canada, so now, she speedily felt the misgivings which invariably attach to a false position. She reproached herself for having hidden the truth from her relative, the Countess de Serq, and for having profited of Madame Mireille's liberality. It was all very well for the cunning Baroness de Soumans to gild the pill, as she did right artfully, all very well for her to swear that this liberality was quite disinterested, that Madame Mireille wished simply to discharge a debt of gratitude by enabling her to marry, all very well for Clorinde to repeat that the credit on Rothschild's was only a loan and that she, Marguerite, would be able to refund it on the day when her Canadian property acquired a value, still and ever the young girl reproached herself for living upon the bounty of a woman whom she scarcely knew ; and what is more she began to mistrust this woman's intentions.

The evening spent at the Variétés Theatre had come as a ray of light. Her benefactress wished her to marry advantageously from a pecuniary point of view, of that there could be no doubt ; but she also wished her to marry a man, selected beforehand ; and the suitor whom Madame Mireille had thus chosen was evidently M. Jacques Valbourg.

Now, M. Valbourg was undoubtedly a good-looking man and he possessed very agreeable manners, but to tell the truth Marguerite did not find him to her taste. And, in point of fact, even if she had found him to her taste, she could not accustom herself to the

idea of deceiving a suitor who, to all intents, as far as she knew, was a perfectly honourable man. Her plan differed widely from Fernande's. Naïvely audacious, she dreamt of meeting in society some lover to her taste, whom she would try by a full confession as regards her past life. If this confession failed to check his ardour, she would be able to marry him without any fear of subsequent self-reproach; and if, on the contrary, he then withdrew, she would be able to console herself for his loss, for that would be proof enough that he did not love her as she wished to be loved. And then, spurning what she had accepted, she would return to Canada, where no one, possessed of courage, dies of hunger.

However the lover after Marguerite's heart had not yet shown himself. But one single man, among those she had recently been introduced to had attracted her attention, and on his side he had paid no attention to her. Monsieur de Bolgos seemed to her more aristocratic than Valbourg, and more manly than the young fellows whom the Countess de Serq patronised. Marguerite thought him capable of rising above social prejudices and braving public opinion. And so far as that went she was not mistaken, for the Galician nobleman had long since thrown all principles to the winds and overstepped every limit. Only, Marguerite did not understand independence in that style.

Moreover, although the count had looked at her once or twice, and although she had readily divined that he considered her charming, he had not departed from a reserve which was so marked as to be almost frigid.

Now Marguerite was so constituted that the more a man pleased her the less disposed she was to make him any advances. She claimed that it was for the man to take all the initiative in matters pertaining to the heart, and she did not countenance hesitation or extraneous intervention. She did not care in the least for "custom," and she would have thought it quite natural had a suitor come to her and said point blank: "I love you, will you take me as your husband?"

Francis Laramie had acted in much that fashion, and although he had cruelly deceived her, she still at times thought of him, and instead of cursing his faithlessness, she said to herself that he must be dead since he had never appeared again; and she reproached herself for not having accompanied him on his wild search for a fortune which he had meant to divide with her.

When, from the balcony at the end of the lounge of the Variétés, Marguerite had caught, amid the crowd thronging the boulevard, a glimpse of a person whose height and figure reminded her of Laramie, she had at once begged the Countess de Serq to take her home. The memory of the past still lingered in the depths of her heart, and she plainly realised that if she ever again saw the man to whom she had been so much attached, her love would spring into being once more.

On the day following that evening when Mademoiselle de Cam-

bremer had partially penetrated the designs of Madame Mireille, the baroness, calling at the Hotel Bristol, found her "dear young friend" in a state of excitement which greatly surprised her, though she determined to turn it to profit. Clorinde had just seen Mariette and Francis Laramie, and had conferred with Fernande with whom she had decided upon a new plan of action so far as Marguerite was concerned. Both of these feminine conspirators were of opinion that it was necessary to get the young girl away from Paris with all possible despatch; and Madame de Soumans' plan was to send her for a month to the South of France. It was a question of persuading her to make the trip, and Clorinde started on her embassy fully determined to exert her diplomatic powers to the utmost.

On arriving at the Hotel Bristol she at once perceived that she would not have much trouble in effecting her purpose, for Marguerite began by telling her that the hotel and the life she was now leading in Paris bored her to death; and that she almost regretted her modest rooms in the Rue du Rocher. She, in fact, all but expressed an inclination to take French leave of her noble relative, Madame de Serq, and to cross the Atlantic and live as she chose in Canada.

After this statement, it was easy enough for Madame de Soumans to suggest that instead of going to extremes, the young girl should simply take a trip to Nice, pending the completion of the arrangements in the Rue Galilée. At Nice, that paradise of foreigners, Marguerite would be as free as a bird, and no one would pay any attention to any American eccentricities that she might indulge in. She might even dispense with taking Madame de Serq as her chaperon. A couple of maids would prove an ample escort.

If Marguerite were willing, she, Clorinde, would secure by telegram a charming furnished house, with which she was acquainted and which overlooked the famous Promenade des Anglais. Of course, the artful baroness took good care not to mention that, while strolling along that very promenade, Mademoiselle de Cambremer might come across M. Jacques Valbourg, who would be there by pure chance—naturally—and who would consider himself the most fortunate man in the world if the young girl only condescended to let him pay her court.

Marguerite did not need any begging to fall in with the baroness's views, and it was arranged that she should leave l'aris a couple of days later. The only conditions that the young girl laid down were that she should first, for Fernande's sake, take the Countess de Serq's opinion, that she should have a parting interview with Madame Mireille, and that she should be free to shorten or prolong her stay at Nice as she pleased. All these conditions were at once accepted, and Madame de Soumans hurried off to communicate the good news to Fernande, who, on her side, informed her noble relative that Madame de Serq had just called on behalf of M. de Bolgos to ask her for her hand in marriage.

Marguerite spent her evening that day, revolving various plans in her head. She looked upon this trip as a sort of truce which would give her time to arrive at a final decision as to her future course ; and she did not feel disposed to return to Paris and don once more the golden chains with which her dear protectors seemed anxious to fetter her. It even occurred to her that she would do as well to leave her maid, Mariette, in Paris. This girl was connected with the Baroness de Soumans, and Marguerite, who now thought of recovering her freedom, did not wish to be spied upon.

The following morning went by without any fresh visit from Clorinde, and at noon Marguerite despatched Mariette to the Rue du Rocher to let the baroness know that she intended to dine that evening with Madame de Serq. After that, she dressed, unassisted, as Mariette had not returned, and at two o'clock she went to her window to see if her brougham was waiting outside. She had ordered it, intending to go to the Rue St. Dominique in view of acquainting the countess with her impending departure.

Not only was her brougham there, in front of the hotel door, but another very elegant vehicle of the same description had just drawn up, and a gentleman was alighting from it, a gentleman whom Marguerite recognised at once, whom she would have recognised among a thousand, for he was none other than the Count de Bolgos.

The young girl hastily drew back. She did not wish to be seen, and she asked herself, with a certain amount of emotion, whether M. de Bolgos had come to call upon her? This did not seem likely, for she barely knew him, and it is not customary for a gentleman to call unaccompanied, upon a young girl who is alone. Besides, the hotel was full of distinguished foreigners, and the count, a foreigner himself, had very likely come to see some compatriot.

However, it might be that he had been sent to her with some message by Madame de Serq, who held him in very high esteem, and who might have authorised this infraction of accepted customs —a very harmless infraction by the way, as Mademoiselle de Cambremer behaved as though she were a married woman.

As Marguerite was in doubt upon the point, she thought it would be best to wait a moment before leaving her apartments, so that she might not meet the count upon the stairs. She would have at once guessed his intentions had she only known that he had just come from the British Embassy in the Faubourg St. Honoré, and that he had there learnt that the news given by the Quebec newspaper was perfectly correct, and that her estates near the Red River were worth millions, since the discovery of the petroleum springs.

However, the young girl was not acquainted with all this, and, besides, she presumed that if M. de Bolgos wished to see her, he would send and ask if she would do him the honour of receiving him. She had almost made up her mind to answer affirmatively, for she did not wish this nobleman to imagine that she was in the least degree afraid of him. However, although a hotel may be managed in the best style, it is nevertheless a large open house,

which any one of good appearance may enter or leave without saying where he is going or where he comes from. And the servants, however well trained, are never numerous enough to mount guard at the door of each suite of rooms.

The suite occupied by Mademoiselle de Cambremer comprised four apartments, including an ante-room where Mariette usually remained when she was not waiting upon her mistress. However, that afternoon Mariette had not yet returned from the Rue du Rocher, and Marguerite was quite alone in her sitting-room, the window of which she had approached to ascertain if her brougham were waiting for her, outside. She walked up and down, quite ready to go out, gloved and holding her parasol in her hand, and glancing at the clock, and counting each minute as it went by. Five or six had certainly elapsed since she had seen the count alight from his brougham, and she had just made up her mind to go downstairs, when the door was softly opened.

She stopped short. M. de Bolgos stood before her. However, she did not retreat. In fact she seemed fairly cool and collected. He, on his side, appeared to be somewhat agitated, and yet, he was not a timid man. But in the present instance he was playing for very high stakes, and he might win or he might lose. There was certainly nothing awkward about his embarrassment, and he did not present himself like a hobbledehoy calling for the first time upon an actress. Nor did he apologise for the intrusion, in clumsy middle-class fashion. The situation did not admit of his taking any common-place course.

"Mademoiselle," said he, with a bow, "if I ventured to enter Madame Mireille's presence in this style, I should consider it my duty to make all sorts of apologies and explanations. But I am sure that you do not entertain any high opinion of the stupid formulas of affected politeness, and I prefer to confess to you that I have acted in this way intentionally. I hoped that I should find you alone and I did not wish to be announced."

"You are welcome, sir," replied Marguerite, without being disconcerted. "I prefer frankness above anything else." As she spoke the look on her face did not belie her words ; M. de Bolgos's assurance had pleased her ; her eyes revealed that plainly enough. "And now," she resumed, with a smile, "what do you desire ? You must tell me that, and you may do so without any preamble."

"Without any disguise, I can understand that ; but without any preamble, that is difficult to manage."

"Why ? Is the purpose of your visit so very strange then ?" inquired the young girl, with a fresh smile.

"The purpose ? No—but it is so very—I can't think of the right word—so very premature, perhaps. I was introduced to you only on the day before yesterday."

"Indeed, sir ! But you would hardly speak otherwise if you had come to ask me for—my hand !"

"It is more than that, I have come to tell you ; I love you."

FERNANDE'S CHOICE.

" You ! you love me !" cried Marguerite, greatly disturbed by this most unexpected declaration.

" Yes, ever since I have known you," replied Bolgos, audaciously.

" That is to say, since the day before yesterday."

" No, since the day when I first saw you in the Bois de Boulogne in the Countess de Serq's carriage. That was three weeks ago."

" Three weeks or two days, that amounts to the same thing."

" You do not believe in love at first sight, then ? Ah ! with me it came as a thunder clap, as a flash of lightning. On the afternoon when I first saw you I swore that you should become my wife."

" Even in spite of myself ?"

" No. But if you refuse to marry me I know what I shall do. I shall simply blow my brains out," said the count, in a tone of voice which made Marguerite turn pale. " Ah ! you take me for a madman," he added, with well feigned emotion. " You do not know me. If you were only aware how much ardent passion and cold resolution there is mingled in my nature, you would believe what I just told you. Oh ! do not ask me why I have so far remained silent, why I did not try to become acquainted with you earlier—I might have done so, as Madame de Serq, your relative, was my father's friend, and has always given me a cordial reception."

" She has often spoken to me about you," interrupted Marguerite.

" Then you know who I am—you know that there are few families of higher lineage than mine in Europe—that I am wealthy, very wealthy. But are you aware that for ten years past I have been leading the stupid life of an idler, running after pleasure ? In truth, I was only seeking forgetfulness, for—shall I own it ?—when very young I loved a young girl, and on the eve of the day fixed for our wedding she died. But in seeking forgetfulness I only found disgust—and I was unable to stifle in my heart that eternal feeling—the need of loving—of loving deeply and truly—of giving myself without reserve, of sacrificing myself to a woman I could adore— Ah ! mademoiselle, it is said that you also are wealthy, well, I only wish that you were poor—without a name, without relatives, without any support in the world, so that I might still fall at your feet—"

M. de Bolgos had launched forth these words without falling into the grotesque. Such fire gleamed in his eyes, and the entire expression of his face agreed so well with his burning declaration, that Marguerite began to feel some little emotion. The wild, mad love that the count offered her was seemingly that which she had dreamt of in hours of discouragement, when she had thought of flinging far aside all the deception of a false position.

But how could she answer this violent suitor who began with such a passionate explosion, most singular on the part of a man of his birth and breeding ? All that Marguerite could think of saying was : " I am going away, sir, I am about to leave Paris."

This was simply throwing oil upon the flames.

" Wherever you may go I shall follow !" said Bolgos, with an

air which left no doubt as to the indomitable energy of his resolve.

Marguerite once more tried an easy air : " Oh ! I am not going very far," she said, endeavouring to smile, " I am going to Nice—but alone—Madame de Serq will not accompany me, and what would be said if you travelled with me ? "

" It might be said that I was your husband ; for in three days time we might be married, if you were willing. We are not French. We might be married to-morrow in London, if you consented."

" And so you simply come to propose that I should elope with you ? " asked Marguerite, suddenly becoming suspicious. The idea had occurred to her that M. de Bolgos wished to get hold of her fortune, believing her to be very wealthy.

" I have come to tell you that I belong to you," replied the count, firmly. " Dispose of me ! But if you drive me away—I have said it already—it will cause my death ! "

" And if I told you," rejoined Marguerite, urged on by a desire to put the count's sincerity of purpose to the test. " If I told you that I am completely ruined, that I have no other property save some worthless land in the depths of Canada, and that I am living in Paris on the bounty of a woman who takes an interest in me ? "

By way of reply, Bolgos made a superb gesture of disdain.

" If I told you that before residing at this hotel I lived in a modest furnished room ? " resumed Marguerite, growing more and more animated, " if I told you that I think of returning there ? "

" I should repeat to you, mademoiselle, that I am ready to marry you and I should beg of you to leave France with me. I possess vast estates in Hungary, where we could live far away from the madding crowd, and where you would be as free as you were in your own dear country."

This time Marguerite was touched to the heart. Was the count then the man whom she had longed for, sufficiently in love with her and sufficiently unprejudiced to marry her, knowing what she was ? However, Monsieur de Bolgos did not yet know everything, and Mademoiselle de Cambremier, having reached this point in her confession, felt bound to go on to the end. What did she care now for the Baroness de Soumans' advice or for the plans of Madame Mireille ? It was better to have done with it without delay, since she had decided to burn her ships.

" And if I told you," she resumed looking full in M. de Bolgos's face, " if I told you, that I had already loved some one ? "

" I should ask you if you still loved him," replied the count, " and if you answered yes, the only course left to me would be to kill myself. But if you no longer love him, I should not reproach you for having done so. Didn't I once love a woman who is dead ? "

" But if he were not dead, and if he still loved me ? "

" Then I should not kill myself, I should kill him."

This was said with such frightful simplicity, that Marguerite started, and the expression of her face changed.

"And now," said she, "would you marry me even if I declared to you that I once ran away with him, and acted wrongly?"

The count took two steps backward, a flame darted from his eye, and he clenched his fists. The most consummate actor could not have simulated a pang of agony with greater skill.

"Yes," said M. de Bolgos slowly, "I would marry you. When shall we start?"

Marguerite, well nigh conquered by such a display of generosity, yielded to a sudden impulse, and offered her hand to the count without suspecting that he would abuse the position. He took her proffered hand and held it in his own; and then softly pressing it, he began in a mellow, vibrating voice one of these passionate disjointed speeches, which lack all sense to indifferent folks, but which women of an excitable temperament readily understand. The young girl stood listening to him, her eyes gazing into his, and becoming more and more intoxicated by the passionate music resounding in her ears. Had she not waited long enough for that lover far across the ocean? Ought she to wait still longer? Must he not be dead? Or had he forgotten her for some one else? This man whose eloquent pleadings she could now hear, was handsome, disinterested, rich, and was it not her duty to herself to accept his offer? Might she not then lead a new life, and forget a vanished happiness amid the delights of future affection? "Twas thus she pondered; still mindful of the absent Laramie—dead perhaps—and irresolute as to what decision she should take. Let no one blame her if she thus hesitated. She had remained true to her trust so long, murmuring, "He cometh not," like Mariana in the moated grange, and if she now thought of plighting her troth anew, it was surely not her fault, but that of the lover, who for so many long days, and weeks and months had given no signs of life.

The scene was a strange one. It had begun so suddenly that they had both remained standing, a position not suited to the pantomimic action which is considered a needful accessory to every burning declaration. The man who is seated near a woman, can draw her to his heart in a natural, easy way; or, at the psychological moment, he can gradually let himself glide until his knees touch the carpet. Perfect novices accomplish that without exaggeration.

But when the two lovers are standing it is not so easy for the suitor to sink upon his knees. The fall must be managed in a spontaneous, graceful way beyond the capabilities of most men, young or old. As a rule, indeed, it is only upon the stage that one sees the hero execute such a movement, and it not unfrequently happens that a critical audience hisses the actor for his awkwardness. Only most accomplished artistes avoid becoming ridiculous under these circumstances, and playwrights know it so well, that they reserve this grand display for the most pathetic scenes of their blackest dramas.

However, M. de Bolgos could have taught histrionics had he chosen, and long and wide experience had made him a master in the

art of feigning love. Without ceasing to talk in the wildest strains of passion, he raised Marguerite's hand to his lips, and kissed her on the arm, just above her glove. She quivered as she felt the contact of his burning lips, and at once tried to free herself; but he held her firmly, and the effort she had made, threw her by a recoil into his arms. He had expected it. In fact, all his strategy had been combined in view of securing that result: Marguerite made a frantic effort to escape him, but the villain was strong and eager to obtain his victory. Chance, however, which orders many things well in this world, was against him, for suddenly the door of the sitting room was thrown open, and a man darted upon the count, caught hold of him by the throat, raised him up like a feather, and pushed him against the wall.

The onslaught was so sudden and so violent, that Bolgos lacked the time either to defend himself or to call out. And when his assailant's hands relaxed their grip upon his throat, he sank upon the carpet, without making a single convulsive movement.

"Die, you dog!" said the person who had treated the count in this style. And without paying any further attention to the rascal he had strangled, he walked up to Marguerite, who recognised him.

"Francis!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Francis whom you thought dead, and who has come back expressly to kill your favoured lover!" said the Canadian, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You are mistaken, I was resisting that man, and you have done right in killing him," replied Marguerite without retreating or lowering her eyes.

"But I surprised you in his arms!" rejoined Laramie fiercely.

"He was forcibly detaining me. If it had been otherwise, do you imagine that I should thank you for killing him?"

"Why not? You were tired of that admirer no doubt, and you must have plenty of others."

"I forbid you insulting me. It was enough for you to desert me!"

"You wretched girl! you it is who have been faithless! I knew what you have been doing. You have led a disreputable life since you left that house in the Rue du Rocher."

"You lie!" This reply was made in such a tone that Francis hesitated. "Yes, you lie, or you repeat a lie, which you foolishly believed," added Marguerite, with a superb gesture of contempt. "And you come here with threats and insults on your tongue! You no doubt imagined that I should implore your forgiveness for myself, and your mercy for that man, whom I only saw once before to-day, and whose audacity I was resisting, when you sprang upon him. You ought to know me better! I loved you once, 'tis true, but I hate you now, and I tell you that your base accusations have filled the cup to overflowing. You have caused me too much suffering already. Leave this room."

Laramie turned pale, and pointed to the corpse, lying upon the carpet, a few paces off.

"Well, what does that matter?" resumed Marguerite, "I shall not be accused of strangling him, and if I am questioned, I shall tell the truth. I shall say that, tired of waiting for Monsieur Francis Laramie who had promised to marry me, I accepted the proposals of a woman, who was my neighbour—"

"The Baroness de Soumans!"

"You have seen her!"

"Yes, it is she who accuses you!"

"She! Ah! Now I order you to remain—you must accompany me to the Rue du Rocher. We will see whether she will dare to deny in my presence that her friend, Madame Mireille, begged of me to accept a sum of money which she placed at my disposal to enable me to re-enter society. And my relative, Madame de Serq, will tell you what I have been doing since I came to reside at this hotel. I shall confess to her that I deceived her as regards you, for I never mentioned your name to her. And when I have told her my story, she will no doubt close her doors upon me. I shall have deserved that, and I shall not try to justify myself, but I will at least confound the infamous creature who has slandered me, and if it was she who sent you here—"

"She swore to me," interrupted Laramie, "that she had not seen you since your departure, and that she did not know what had become of you. I was trying to find you, and it was a servant girl who came to tell me that I should find you here."

"Mariette!"

"I paid her for her information, and started at once."

"And that girl, like her worthy patroness, Madame de Soumans, no doubt accuses me of leading a disreputable life?"

"No, she did not say that; but it is true that she guessed why I wanted to find you."

"I cannot guess it," said Mademoiselle de Cambremer, looking Laramie full in the face.

"I wanted to find you to make you my wife."

"But you no longer wish to marry me I suppose, since you have been so well informed about me. So why have you come here?"

"To hand you your share of the fortune which I have made," answered the Canadian.

"And you imagined that I would accept it? Keep it! I will not take anything coming from you."

"Even if I told you that I still loved you?" asked Francis, who was pale with emotion.

"I should not believe you."

"If I swore to you that I have never ceased to love you, and that for the last six months it has been impossible for me to write to you, lost as I was in the wilds of Colorado, fighting against hunger, braving death for your sake, so that I might bring you back millions of money. They came at last. I sold the mine I had discovered, and lost no time in taking ship. But I arrived too late, you had grown weary of waiting for me. I wept, and yet dreadful as were

the stories I was told, I forgave you in the bottom of my heart. Just now when I came here, I had no intention of revenging myself. I meant to say, 'It is I who am the guilty one ;' but I found that man and then my anger carried me away !'

"What should you have done had you found me alone ?" asked Marguerite.

"I should have fallen at your feet ; and now, say but one word, only one, and I will forget everything."

"I do not wish you to forget, I wish you to have no further doubt of me. I wish you to take me as I am, without questioning me. If you did question me, I could not answer you, for I do not know as yet in what low intrigue I have been unwittingly playing a part. Still I will tell you all I know. If you still have faith in me, blind faith, I am ready to follow you, and I shall be glad never to set my eyes again upon creatures I despise. But if you are not convinced, if you hesitate, or if you fear that, later on, you may regret having believed me, then go ! All will be at an end between us. And I swear to you that I will be silent as to how that man came by his death, even if I be accused of murdering him."

"Come," answered Francis, simply.

"Where do you mean to take me ?"

"To England. We shall be there to-morrow morning ; and in a fortnight we can reach America. But we have no time to lose."

"I am ready," answered Marguerite without the slightest hesitation. She seemed to be of iron, and did not even vouchsafe a glance to the Count de Bolgos, now merely a corpse.

He had richly deserved his fate ; but if the Baroness de Soumans had better understood the character of her little neighbour, she would certainly never have urged Fernande to embark on an enterprise fated to end so disastrously. Francis Laramie, fully informed by Mariette who had pocketed the reward for her revelations, and who did not care about returning to her mistress's, Francis had at once started for the Hotel Bristol, and gone upstairs reaching Mademoiselle de Cambremer's apartments without needing to make any inquiries. Nobody had seen him enter the hotel ; nobody saw him leave it. Marguerite sent away her brougham which was waiting at the door, and proceeded on foot to the corner of the Rue de Rivoli where she joined her lover who had gone on in advance.

They then took a cab which drove them to the railway station. Francis had a large sum in cash and various letters of credit in his pocket. He did not take the trouble to return to the Grand Hotel to fetch his luggage ; and Mademoiselle de Cambremer did not give a thought to the dresses which she was leaving behind her at the Hotel Bristol. Their flight was strangely simple. A train was about to start when they reached the Northern Railway Station, and an hour after M. de Bolgos had met with so sudden and violent a death, the iron horse was conveying them towards Boulogne.

Just then, Jacques Valbourg, who also wished to bring matters to a climax, was ringing at the door of Madame Mireille's mansion.

VIII.

VALBOURG had spent a very bad night. He had waited at the club for M. de Bolgos, and the latter failing to appear, he had decided to dine without him. To while away the evening, and quiet his anxiety, he had taken part in a game of cards with the result that his pocket money was exhausted. He went home at a very late or rather an early hour, and only fell asleep towards daybreak. The surprising news which he had heard had plunged him into painful perplexity, and he took but little rest. He would have felt consoled had the only revelation been that Mademoiselle de Cambremer was now possessed of millions, although he could not hope to marry her had she really become such a wealthy heiress. In point of fact, he had never for one moment imagined that she would throw herself at his head ; and he had plainly realised that he had not produced an extremely favourable impression on her. However, there were other heiresses in Paris who would probably prove of less difficult composition, and assist him in revenging himself upon Fernande.

But the catastrophe which threatened the Count de Bolgos was another matter. It affected Valbourg far more than Marguerite's change of fortune did. There was no longer any possible reason for doubting Sornac's statement, since M. de Naneras had been summoned to the dépôt of the Prefecture of Police to recognise the masquerading foot-pads. Plainly enough, the latter would speedily denounce their leader, who evidently foresaw such a contingency.

As soon as that young "masher" Naneras, plundered a few nights previously, had begun his story, the Count de Bolgos had changed countenance. And moreover, he had profited by the first pretext he could find to go off. For in Valbourg's opinion the appointment which the count had spoken of was a pretext and nothing else. Besides, the Galician nobleman had promised to return to dine at the club, but he had not been seen there again ; and he was probably making ready for a speedy departure.

On the following morning, Valbourg at least learnt that the count was still in Paris. In fact, he received a note from M. de Bolgos apologising for not having returned to the club, and fixing an appointment for the same evening between eleven o'clock and midnight. The postman who brought this note also brought a perfumed missive from Fernande, who, in gracious language, asked her ex-lover to have the kindness to call upon her before four

o'clock, as she had something of importance to tell him. Valbourg decided to comply with her request, for he was anxious to bring the imbroglio to a conclusion. The uncertainty in which he was now living was proving positive torture.

At noon Justin called ; he came to take leave of his master before setting out for Hâvre, where he meant to embark for the United States. He had not learnt anything fresh about the masqueraders ; and indeed the newspapers did not say one word about the arrest of a gang of foot-pads commanded by a gentleman moving in high society ; so that, according to all probabilities, the count had not yet been arrested. Besides, Justin had caught sight of him in the Faubourg St. Honoré at a stone's throw from the British Embassy. But on the other hand, even if M. de Belgos were still in Paris, he might easily leave at any moment.

Valbourg having prepared himself for every eventuality, and placed all necessary documents in his pocket, at last set out for the Rue de Lisbonne, but a short walk from his own rooms. As soon as he rang at the gate of Madame Mireille's mansion, he perceived that he was expected ; for the footman, who ushered him into the house, did not go to inquire whether madame was at home, but led him at once into the small sitting-room where she was in the habit of receiving her intimate friends. She was there, and she greeted Valbourg with marked cordiality.

"How glad I am to see you," she said, making him take a seat beside her on the roomy sofa, on which she had been waiting in a seated attitude. "I have so many things to tell you that I really don't know how to commence."

"And I have several things to tell you," answered Valbourg.

"So much the better. We shan't let the conversation drop. But I ask permission to speak first on an important matter."

"What is it, pray?"

"To begin with, I must ask you a question. Have you seen Mademoiselle de Cambremer again?"

"Since we met at the Variétés? No, certainly not. Pray, remember that it was only on the day before yesterday."

"Well, you must go and see her as soon as you leave here, for she is going to Nice where she intends to stay a month or so."

"With her relative, Madame de Serq?"

"That isn't quite decided. The fact is, the countess is rather too old to care for travelling. So, if she fears the fatigue of the trip, Mademoiselle de Cambremer will start alone, to-morrow."

"Very good ; however I don't see—"

"What!" interrupted Madame Mireille, "haven't you noticed that she is head over heels in love with you?"

"That's rubbish ! You are chaffing me," replied Valbourg.

"Chaffing you ! what a notion ! So you still fancy that I am cross with you. You make a very great mistake. I have forgotten everything, and I hoped that you had forgotten everything as well. Didn't we sign peace in my box at the theatre?"

"No doubt we did ; but it seems to me that you hardly abide by the treaty. You won't make me believe that that young girl fell in love with me at first sight."

"Where can your eyes be then ? Don't be so modest, my friend ; place a little confidence in a woman who wishes for no other revenge than that of assuring your happiness. Mademoiselle de Cambremer finds you to her taste—I know it—and it only depends on you, to win her hand."

"To-day then, since she is going away to-morrow," remarked Valbourg sarcastically.

"Don't poke fun. You can call upon her at five o'clock this afternoon, I feel certain that she will be at home, and she will undoubtedly grant you an interview. I need not tell you, I suppose, what you ought to say to her. You are proficient in the language of love, and you will no doubt be able to couch your declaration in terms which Mademoiselle de Cambremer may hear, and which she will readily understand. It will be quite sufficient if you let her know that she will meet you at Nice."

"At Nice ! What ! do you suggest my going there ?"

"Without losing a moment. Your marriage will be arranged there, no doubt of it. Just remember that that young lady is perfect mistress of her actions—free to choose as she pleases. The only person she will know at Nice will be you, and you would have to be very clumsy, indeed, to fail in securing her hand."

"Or very lukewarm in courting her," objected Valbourg.

"Well, you were very eager on the night before last. Have you heard anything unfavourable about the young lady ?" asked Madame Mircille, scrutinizing Valbourg closely.

"Unfavourable, no—on the contrary."

"Then why have your views changed ? I told you the other evening that I would make inquiries about the young lady and study her character. Well, I went to see her expressly for that purpose, and I also had a long conversation about her with the Countess de Serq, whose honourability you cannot question. The result is this : I have come to the conclusion that Mademoiselle de Cambremer is perfection personified. She has every quality and every virtue, and there is nothing commonplace about her, as is the case with the young ladies who are brought up in fashionable boarding-schools and who all know how to sing the same songs. She has a touch of originality calculated to please a man of your tastes, for I know that you don't like ordinary people or things. Well, in addition to her personal charms and qualities, she has a handsome fortune and superb prospects. Half a million of francs in hard cash, plus some estates which if they were cultivated would yield an enormous income. What do you say to that ?"

"I say that you don't know everything," retorted Valbourg.

"Excuse me ! I may as well admit that yesterday my notary verified the countess's statements at my request. Mademoiselle de Cambremer arrived in Paris with a credit on Rothschild's."

"Don't you read the newspapers?" interrupted Valbourg abruptly.

"The—newspapers. Why do you ask me that?"

"Because if you read them you would have seen that Mademoiselle de Cambremer is now the fortunate possessor of an incalculable number of millions."

"What! do the newspapers talk about her!" exclaimed Fernande in astonishment.

"Not about *her* precisely, but about the wonderful fortune which has fallen to her. Some petroleum springs have been discovered upon her estates—finer springs than all those in the famous oil valley in the United States."

"What a joke!" exclaimed Fernande.

"Oh! I am speaking quite seriously."

"But if this marvellous discovery were a fact, Mademoiselle de Cambremer would be acquainted with it."

"No, she isn't aware of it as yet," said Valbourg. "The news has only just reached Paris. Still, Mademoiselle de Cambremer will no doubt be promptly informed; for the Governor General of Canada has apprised the British Ambassador here, and he is trying to find the heiress and will speedily succeed, no doubt."

Fernande, who was greatly disturbed by this information, wondered whether she ought to believe it, and what she ought to say in reply. Fortunately at this moment a servant knocked at the door and entered carrying a letter upon a silver salver. Madame Mircille at once recognised the handwriting of the superscription, and she hastily tore the envelope open without as much as glancing at Valbourg, who on his side, was watching her most attentively.

The note, signed "Clorinde," was by no means a long one, although it contained a deal of information. It ran as follows:—

"Everything is lost. That hussy Mariette has betrayed us. She guessed that the woman, whom the Canadian was trying to find, was none other than her mistress, and she has just sold him the address. He has paid such a high price for it, that she can now afford to snap her fingers at me, and she has had the audacity to come and tell me what she has done. That transatlantic savage is unfortunately so rich that Margot will slip through our fingers. I am going to see her at the Hotel Bristol so as to find out what is the exact position of affairs, and I shall be at your house in an hour's time. However, it is already certain that our plan won't succeed. Content yourself with marrying the Count de Bolgos and let your friend Valbourg marry whom he likes. His valet does not know anything—at least so Mariette swore to me, and I believe that she spoke the truth. She didn't tell him anything as she wishes to keep all the money for herself. Valbourg also can't know anything; so act accordingly, and don't go out before I call."

"What is the matter, pray?" suddenly asked Valbourg seeing that Madame Mircille was losing countenance as she progressed in her perusal. "Has that note brought you any bad news?"

"No, no, it's nothing" replied Fernande, folding up Clorinde's

letter. "Let us return to what we were saying about Mademoiselle de Cambremer. You inform me that she is immensely rich. Well, so much the better. I only wish that she were the richest heiress in the world, since it is so easy for you to marry her."

"She is already too wealthy for me to come forward as a suitor," responded Valbourg. "In the first place I shouldn't be accepted ; and above all I don't want the young lady to imagine that I have an eye after her fortune. For that reason I sha'n't go to Nice, nor shall I go to the Hotel Bristol, nor even to the Countess de Serq's."

"And so," rejoined Madame Mireille, slowly, "you renounce winning Mademoiselle de Cambremer's hand ?"

"Yes—I haven't come to the decision without some regret. But it is forced upon me by circumstances."

"Then, if Mademoiselle de Cambremer hadn't been so rich, you would have been glad to marry her ?"

"Very glad," replied Valbourg with alacrity. "Why should I hide it from you ? Didn't you, yourself, advise me to court her ? I am not so vain as to believe that you would have felt jealous of my happiness. I don't count for you nowadays. We parted—because circumstances compelled it—and I'm sure that you have never harboured any spite against me."

"You are sure of it ?" said Fernande, raising her head.

"Well, the proof that you haven't had any spite against me, is that you tried to help me to make a very advantageous marriage. I suppose you would call that returning good for evil. And even if you did, ever think that I had slighted you, at all events you cannot have felt the slight very acutely, since you have already forgotten it."

"You are mistaken. I have a better memory than you suppose," rejoined Madame Mireille. "I have revenged myself ; as you refused to marry me, so I have found another husband."

"Count Stanislas de Bolgos, no doubt," said Valbourg, smiling.

"You were aware of it ?"

"He told me all about it, yesterday—after the Countess de Serq had called upon you."

"And did the news please you ?"

"Please me ? No ! But it didn't surprise me. You, yourself, told me that you found Monsieur de Bolgos to your liking."

"And you almost advised me to marry him. I adopted your idea," said Madame Mireille.

"Without losing any time, I see," retorted Valbourg, drily. "But if that is your revenge—"

"Oh ! it suffices me. Monsieur de Bolgos is much richer than you are. He is descended on the maternal side from the ancient Kings of Hungary, and his paternal ancestors were the foremost lords of Poland in the days when that country was an independent state. You, yourself, my dear Valbourg, are only a commoner ; so as I am to be his wife, I can console myself for not being yours. Still, I wish you to know that it is no fault of mine if I did not

revenge myself upon you in a more complete and cruel fashion—”

“ Do you hate me so much, then ? ”

“ Yes, as much as I once loved you and that is saying a good deal,” replied Fernande, with a firm glance, but not without a slight tremor in her voice. “ Ah ! you took me for one of those coquettes who allow a lover to desert them without punishing him for his betrayal ! Ah ! You were duped by the indifference I displayed in view of making you feel at ease ! You naively imagined that because I had submitted without complaining to your affront, I meant to give you my friendship, as you didn’t care for my love. Really now, you must have had a very singular idea of my character. Learn to know me better. If all women acted as I have done, if they all had sufficient energy to avenge a humiliation, men like you would hesitate before they deceived them.”

“ Good heavens ! what vengeance can you possibly have invented ? ” asked Valbourg in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

“ I will tell you, since chance prevents me from carrying my vengeance to the bitter end. You will escape the punishment which you so richly deserve, but I shall at least have the satisfaction of showing you the precipice over which you were about to fall, and of telling you—that I—I alone—had led you to the brink. You did not consider me worthy of being your wife. Well, I found a woman worthy of you.”

“ Mademoiselle de Cambremer, eh ? Well, what of that ? ”

“ Well, do you know where that young lady comes from ? You imagine that she recently arrived from America, and that on arriving in Paris she went straight to see her cousin the Countess de Serq. However, you are mistaken ; Mademoiselle de Cambremer has been in Paris for the past year living in furnished rooms—of a kind which only disreputable characters patronise. If you doubt what I say, just go to No. 99, Rue du Rocher, and make some inquiries about little Margot who lived on the first floor.”

“ No. 99, Rue du Rocher, you say ? Ah ! I remember now, that’s the address of your friend Clorinde. If there is anything infamous in the story you wish to tell me, I sha’n’t be surprised to learn that Madame de Soumans is mixed up in it.”

“ It wasn’t Madame de Soumans who persuaded Mademoiselle Marguerite de Cambremer to run away from home with a lover—over there in Canada ? Do you imagine that I am slandering the girl ? You can easily verify my statements, if you choose. That lover of hers is here in Paris at this very moment. He has turned up again after deserting the poor, accomplished girl, so guileless that she had trusted him with all her fortune. It appears that he has brought it back to her ; however, according to your statements she has no need of it. So much the better for her, if your account of the petroleum springs be correct. But go and see her lover. His name is Francis Laramie and he is staying at the Grand Hotel.”

“ And Madame de Serq is aware of all this ? ” asked Valbourg.

"Madame de Serq has been deceived in the same way as yourself. I did everything. You may tell the countess so, if you choose. At the point that affairs have now reached, I have no further precautions to take."

"Not even as regards Monsieur de Bolgos?" asked Valbourg.

"What I would you be sufficiently cowardly to denounce me to him?" asked Fernande, as a flush mantled over her cheeks. "Do you mean to tell him that I tried to revenge myself on you by placing Mademoiselle de Cambremer in your way?"

"You know very well that I sha'n't do anything of the kind," answered Valbourg. "Still, I might do so without in the least preventing your marriage."

"I don't understand you, I'm afraid," retorted Madame Mireille, drily. "Do you mean to assert that Monsieur de Bolgos would marry me, no matter what you might tell him?"

"Yes, that is what I do mean. He doesn't care a fig for your past life. No, indeed! It is merely your fortune that he is after."

"Jealousy blinds you, I'm sorry to see. Monsieur de Bolgos has no need of my fortune. He has more money than I have."

"Well, if you like, perhaps he has. But if you are agreeable I shall be glad to return to the subject of Mademoiselle de Cambremer. You have just told me that you had done everything. What do you imply by that statement?"

"I mean that chance having acquainted me with that young person, I at once conceived the idea of confiding to her the principal part in a comedy by which you were to be duped. She possessed all the attainments necessary to play that part in a natural style, and she lent herself to my plans with a very good grace. I brought her out regardless of expense. I opened in her favour a large credit on Rothschild's, and I was about to furnish a handsome house for her. You fell into the trap, and you would certainly have married her if an unforeseen event had not thwarted my plan. Well, on the day after your wedding I should have had the delight of acquainting you with your wife's antecedents. As it is, I am obliged to forego the pleasure I anticipated. Still I can at least enjoy your confusion. It is a sad fall for your illusions, is it not? You smile, I see. You want to make me believe that you don't feel hurt. However, I know you, my dear Valbourg. You are the proudest man in the world and I have struck you in your pride. You will never forgive me; and that is what I hoped for."

"You are mistaken," said Valbourg, "I do forgive you."

"You can have no blood in your veins, then," retorted Fernande.

"I forgive you, because I know you—much better than you know me," replied Valbourg. "You simply did all this because you loved me, because you never loved anyone else but me."

"Well, I never heard of audacity to equal that. You are vain beyond imagination!"

"No, no, for I am willing to admit that I have never ceased loving you, and I deeply regret our estrangement, due to hastiness

both on your and my side. But shall I give you a proof of what I say? You are about to marry the Count de Bolgos, eh?"

"In a month from now—in a fortnight, if it's possible; I only wish that I could marry him to-morrow, so as to show you how little I care for you."

"Then I only need keep silent to ensure the success of my revenge. And, in fact, if I didn't care for you, I *should* keep silent; but I love you too much, and I must take pity on you."

"Are you going to slander your friend? Have a care!" said Fernande, with a warning gesture.

"Monsieur de Bolgos never was my friend," responded Valbourg. "I started a spurious intimacy with him, because, on my side also, I wished to be revenged; and, singularly enough, I selected much the same means as you did. Only, I have succeeded, whereas you have failed, for it depends upon me alone to save you from ruin. Do you know what the Count de Bolgos really is?"

"A great nobleman, and a worthy man, whereas you—"

"No, no, the Count de Bolgos is neither more nor less than the leader of a band of robbers!"

"Really!" exclaimed Fernande, sarcastically. "You might at least invent some less absurd charge."

"Are you acquainted with his handwriting?" asked Jacques.

"Certainly I am," was the reply. "I only just now reperused the letter which he sent me yesterday after I had seen the Countess de Serq. However, I won't be cruel enough to show you that letter."

"Well, read this one," rejoined Valbourg, handing Fernande a paper which he drew from his pocket-book.

This was the note which the count had sent to Justin with his final instructions as to the purloining of Valbourg's money.

"It does seem to be Monsieur de Bolgos's handwriting," murmured Madame Mireille, when she had read the missive. "But I don't understand what it is all about: 'He will reach my place at ten o'clock, and will remain there till midnight.'"

"He' is myself," explained Valbourg. "This note was sent to my valet, and I will tell you how it happens to be in my hands. You will recollect that on the evening when you called upon me for the last time, you thought you heard the door of the flat open? We listened, but we heard nothing further, and we finally concluded that you had been mistaken. Not at all, however. My servant had surreptitiously entered my rooms for the purpose of robbing me. Monsieur de Bolgos had informed him that I should be at his house in the Rue Jean Gougon all the evening, and, in fact, such would have been the case, had you not warned me of your visit at the last moment. Well, after your departure, I surprised that scamp, Justin, just as he had succeeded in opening my safe with a false key, with which Monsieur de Bolgos had provided him. As I was about to have him arrested, he confessed everything. He gave me the count's letter, and signed this declaration."

So saying, Valbourg drew a second paper from his portfolio, and looking very grave he handed it to Madame Mireille.

She took hold of it, but hesitated to peruse it. She had become extremely pale.

“Read!” said Valbourg, in a firm voice, “read aloud!”

“I declare that I acted by the orders and on behalf of Monsieur de Bolgos—”

“Read on—read on to the end: ‘I also declare, and can prove that Monsieur de Bolgos is the leader of a band of robbers.’”

“How infamous!” muttered Fernande.

“If you don’t believe me,” rejoined Valbourg, “I can send you the valet who signed that confession. He means to leave Paris to-night, for I had promised to let him go to America, but I know where to find him, and, if needs be, I will compel him to repeat his declaration in a court of law. Still, I hardly see what good that would do. Monsieur de Bolgos is on the point of being denounced by some other accomplices—some scamps whom he employed to waylay passers-by in the streets. These footpads have been arrested, and they will speak out. Indeed, they have perhaps done so already. And now I leave you to imagine what will become of the nobleman who, as you said just now, is descended on the maternal side from the ancient kings of Hungary, and whose paternal ancestors used to be the foremost lords of Poland, in one word, the high and mighty noble whom you were going to marry! You spoke, too, of a precipice, Fernande,” added Valbourg, in a voice full of feeling, “well, measure the depth of the one over which you were about to fall. I did not lead you to it, and I don’t regret preventing your fall.”

Madame Mireille still seemed unconvinced, and she was about to reply when a noise of exclamations and hurried footsteps resounded in the adjoining room. A moment later, and the baroness swept into Fernande’s presence like a whirlwind.

“Ah! here you are!” exclaimed Clorinde, impetuously. “I must speak to you at once. Your servants told me that Monsieur Valbourg was here, but it’s all the same to me. And when you hear the news I bring, you will admit that he is not in the way. Besides, the news concerns him in a measure, since the count was his friend. But remain calm; and now listen: Monsieur de Bolgos is dead!”

“The Count de Bolgos! dead!” exclaimed Fernande, overwhelmed.

Valbourg remained unmoved; he was prepared for anything. “How did the count die?” he inquired coldly.

The baroness hesitated for a moment, and looked at Fernande, as if to consult her. But the beautiful widow seemed perfectly stupefied, and so Clorinde resumed: “Oh! I suppose I can tell what I know, I have just come from the Place Vendôme.”

“Where you had no doubt gone to see your friend, Mademoiselle de Cambremer,” interrupted Valbourg.

“Ah! ah! So Fernande has told you that I was acquainted with her. But never mind. It makes it easier for me to tell you the

rest. Yes, I had gone to see her, but do you know what I saw? Why, the police in the hotel, and a gathering outside the door. Monsieur de Bolgos had just been found lying dead on the carpet in the sitting-room occupied by Mademoiselle de Cambremer—”

“And she?”

“She wasn’t there when he died. She had already gone out on foot it seems, and she hasn’t come back as yet. But I can’t imagine how the count entered her rooms and why he went there.”

“I think that I can guess,” muttered Valbourg.

“Then you are a deal more clever than anyone else,” retorted Clorinde. “For the servants of the hotel have no idea—they didn’t even see him come in—and the police don’t understand anything. But that isn’t all. Do you know how it was that several detectives happened to be there? You, no doubt, imagine that they were sent for because the corpse had been found. Not at all. It seems that they had been following Monsieur de Bolgos for more than an hour.”

“Why?” stammered Madame Mireille.

“Ah that’s the wonder of it, my dear! They had been following him to arrest him; but I can’t tell what crime he was accused of. However, this is what took place. I obtained my information from that hussy, Mariette, who was leaving the hotel just as I arrived. She had been questioned by the authorities and she swore to me that she hadn’t told anything; however, she will be questioned afresh, and I am afraid that she’ll let her tongue wag.”

Fernande made a gesture of indifference. What did she care, now, whether Clorinde’s intriguing were discovered or not?

“However,” resumed the Baroness de Soumans, “this is the wonderful story that Mariette told me. The detectives had been following Monsieur de Bolgos for an hour or more. There were three of them in a cab which kept behind the count’s brougham. They had seen him enter the English Embassy in the Faubourg St. Honoré and they hadn’t dared to arrest him when he came out. Their cab-horse had all the trouble in the world to keep Monsieur de Bolgos’s carriage in sight, and when they reached the Hotel Bristol the count had already gone up-stairs. Well, they decided to wait, as they didn’t wish to create a scandal in an establishment patronised by royalty. But, as the count showed no signs of leaving, one of them at last went to question the door-porter. They knew what floor the count was on, as they had seen him for a moment near an open window. On the doorkeeper being questioned, he replied that the person occupying the suite of rooms to which that particular window belonged, had gone out and her maid also, and that there was no one in the apartments. On hearing this the detectives, who feared that Monsieur de Bolgos might escape them, decided to go upstairs. The key was in the door, and everything was in order in the rooms. Only, the count lay upon the floor near the window—”

“How had he died?” again asked Valbourg.

"Well, Mariette told me that it was believed he had been strangled. It seems there was the mark of a clutch round his neck."

"And is the murderer being searched for?"

"Yes ; but the authorities haven't any clue to him."

"I presume that Mademoiselle de Cambromer isn't implicated in the affair ?" said Jacques.

"Oh dear no ! In the first place she wasn't at home. That seems certain, and, then, *she* wouldn't have had strength enough to strangle him. However, she will of course be questioned. That may be expected," added the baroness with a glance at Madame Mireille. "It is supposed that she is now at Madame de Serq's, and, I shouldn't be surprised if the police had gone there after her."

"Well, I don't think that she will be found there," said Valbourg.

"Why don't you think so ?" asked the baroness, in surprise.

"Because I feel quite sure in my own mind that she was at home when her lover strangled Monsieur de Bolgos."

"Her lover !" ejaculated Clorinde, with well feigned surprise. "Have you lost your head ? You know very well that even if Mademoiselle de Cambremer has several admirers, she hasn't, rightly speaking, any lover as yet."

"Oh ! I know what I am talking about ; and as for the lover in question, I am aware that his name is Laramie, that he is staying at the Grand Hotel, and that he has but recently arrived in Paris."

"What ! You know all that !" muttered Clorinde, whose stupefaction was increasing every minute. Who can have betrayed us ?"

"I can even tell you what took place in Mademoiselle de Cambremer's sitting-room," rejoined Valbourg.

"What ! were you there ?"

"Oh dear no ; but I can make a very good guess as to why Monsieur de Bolgos went there. He learnt, only yesterday, that Mademoiselle de Cambremer had come into a fortune of several millions !"

"Millions ! Where are they ?" gasped the baroness.

"In Canada. Some petroleum springs have just been discovered on her estates. Monsieur de Bolgos went to the British Embassy to ascertain whether the news were true. And when he found that it was so, he did not lose any time. He had just asked for Madame Mireille's hand in marriage and had received a favourable reply. But what did he care about jilting a woman ? He hoped that he would be able to persuade Mademoiselle de Cambremer to marry him and then he meant to appropriate her immense wealth. However, as it happened, Monsieur Laramie surprised him with his lady-love and strangled him. Madame Mireille must bless that fellow, Laramie ; for Bolgos, albeit a count, was none the less a villain of the deepest dye ; and the police were on the point of bringing him to book for a long series of misdeeds. His death saves Madame Mireille—"

"I don't say the contrary," retorted the baroness, in a tone of great vexation, "only, I should like to know who gave you so much singular information about Mademoiselle de Cambremer."

"I did!" replied Madame Mireille, rising from the sofa and walking towards Clorinde.

"You—ah! well, I half suspected it."

"Yes, it was I, and I have not yet told Monsieur Valbourg everything. I want him to know, that if I set a trap for him, it was at your instigation."

"Oh! so now you are accusing me," sneered the baroness. "That is really too bad. Had I any grudge against Valbourg? He didn't refuse to marry *me*?"

"Yes, I do accuse you," rejoined Fernande. "For if it had not been for you, I should never have thought of revenging myself in that style upon a man who had deeply wounded my feelings, but to whom I was still attached. It was you who called my attention to that young girl and persuaded her to take part in this intrigue. She was unwilling, and I hesitated, but you prevailed upon us to carry out the scheme."

"Oh! I didn't have much trouble in that respect," bitterly retorted Clorinde. "Margot on her side had suffered enough, and you wanted me to help you in revenging yourself, because you knew very well that Monsieur Valbourg had never been a friend of mine. However, it seems that you have changed your mind and you now sacrifice me, so as to obtain his forgiveness. This is a lesson for me—and I sha'n't again oblige such an ungrateful—"

"Leave the room!" exclaimed Madame Mireille angrily.

"Ah! so you talk in that style. Very well, I'm going; but before doing so I just want to mention that I borrowed a hundred thousand francs from Margot—I owe them to *you*, as a matter of course, and I am in a position to pay them back."

"I make you a present of them," retorted Fernande. "But leave the house—and never come here again."

"You may be sure I sha'n't," replied the baroness, "though I warn you that you will regret me—that is when you two have quarrelled again, which will very soon happen, no doubt."

Thereupon, after favouring Valbourg with an ironical smile, Clorinde strode majestically out of the room.

Fernande was quite upset by so much emotion. She suddenly fell into an armchair and hiding her face in her hands she burst into tears. Her pride was conquered, her heart was brimful of despair, and she longed to die. She did not notice that Jacques was at her feet and that he, also, was weeping.

"I knew—well that you still loved me," said he, drawing her towards him. "You would not have tried to do me so much harm, if I had been indifferent to you. But I also was cruel, and did not prize your affection at its worth."

Fernande made no reply; she was sobbing violently.

"Come, dearest," resumed Jacques, "let us forget the past. For

give me, as I have forgiven you, and let this end as it ought to have begun. Be my wife—”

“Your wife!” gasped Fernande, looking up. “What! You would be willing—after all that has happened? Why I was on the point of marrying a thief, and all Paris will be acquainted with that man's crimes to-morrow!”

“No, he is dead, and people will forget him. Madame de Serq won't talk about her embassy to you. You may be sure of that. Besides, I will see her if necessary—In fact, I must see her, for I don't want her to believe that you took any part in furthering Mademoiselle de Cambremer's imposition.”

“But Mademoiselle de Cambremer will reveal the truth—”

“Oh! she will never return to France again. I am certain that she has gone away with her lover; and as no one will guess that he strangled the Count de Bolgos, they will reach Canada safely. As for Clorinde, she has good reasons for remaining silent; and the maid as well. So what is there to prevent us from being happy? I now only remember our estrangement as one remembers a dream, a bad dream which will never more return. And to make amends for the wrong I did you, I now, on bended knee, Fernande, beg of you to become my wife.”

“Oh! Jacques,” exclaimed Madame Mireille, amid her sobs; and, then, as she flung her arms around her lover's neck, they exchanged in a transport the kiss of abiding peace.

A month later they were married in Italy. Marguerite and Laramie have not since been heard of in Paris, but there is every reason to suppose that they are now leading a happy life across the Atlantic. As for Madame de Soumans, her existence has become a blissful one, but she still dabbles in roulette playing, and it is quite possible that she will contrive to impoverish herself once more. Such, however, will hardly be the case with Justin, who is coining gold as a saloon-keeper at St. Louis. He is so busy attending to the customers who “shout” for Champagne at his bar, that he has little or no time to think of his whilom lady love, the artful Mariette. She, on her side, has certainly forgotten him, for thanks to the money she received from Laramie, she has secured a husband more suited to her tastes, and she is now playing “the lady” in a provincial town. As her betters were reforming, and settling down for life, she considered that she ought to do the same. Looking at the improved circumstances of all the surviving characters in that strange eventful history, there would really seem to be good grounds for believing in the accuracy of the oft-repeated Boulevardian saying that, “everything is for the best, in the very best of worlds.”

THE END.

